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TEN LOST MEN

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Ten Lost Men

by

Michael Nelson Jones ©

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Dedication

To the baby. Let's see what happens.

Abstract

This short story collection explores men lost within themselves. They have lost sight of who they are—sometimes only momentarily—within certain rigid life systems such as the military, academia, the Indian diaspora and cowboy culture. In some instances, they realize that they are lost and act in desperate ways. In others they do not, and the protagonists drift along toward disaster and pain. The goal of this thesis is to write an intelligent and interesting exploration of lost men.

Acknowledgements

Most of the good things in this thesis are there because of Dr. Greg Hollingshead. There could have been many more bad things, but he helped me remove some of those as well. In preparing to write this acknowledgement page, I reviewed several of the theses that he supervised in the past. (They are conveniently stored in the Salter Reading room.) In reading those acknowledgements, I have learned that Dr. Hollingshead's skills as an editor and supervisor are very well documented. I would only add to those many grateful acknowledgements that as much as new writers need good editors, they also need a friend. My meetings with Dr. Hollingshead did more for me than they did for my writing. When he smiles, you can see all of his teeth. A nervous writer looking for some place to escape the heat of self-doubt and self-loathing could do much worse than stand in the enormous cave of that smile. Thank you, Sir.

This thesis would not have been as correct grammatically, and it wouldn't have been as fun to write without the help of Kevin Spencer. It is a rare man who can scour your manuscript for comma splices at two in the afternoon and challenge everybody in the bar to a fight by five. Thank you, Kevin.

To Rudra who read the stories the second I needed them to be read and always had something to say, thank you.

Natasha, thank you.

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As Wrong As Two Boys Fucking

The alfalfa bales were lighter than other bales, but they itched more. The tiny cuts on the skin between the end of my shirt sleeves and the edge of my new leather gloves soaked up sweat that ran from my underarms and the crooks in my elbows. There were thousands of little cuts on those thin bands of unprotected flesh. Every one of them stung with salt and itched from the alfalfa. I loved it.

All the years before that year, I had been forced behind the skinny black steering wheel of the old green Ford, my father's slow, firm voice reminding me to "keep your foot off the gas and damn sure take the truck out of gear before you hit the brake." My father said this every year now, though it was just once, three or four years previously, that the entire end of the load shook loose as the trailer rolled across a rut in the field. The last stacked row fell, and the rest of the load was going to follow. The hot, stale air of the cab and the dullness of guiding the heavy truck up and down the long rows had eased me into a daydream of what it would be like to be doing the dangerous work of flipping bales. The bales had to be flipped so that the wire holding the alfalfa into its rectangular shape was ready for my father to pick up each bale and toss like an empty beer can onto the flatbed trailer. I did not see the bales fall in the side-view mirror. I did not stop.

"Stop the damned truck. Whoa!"

He did not yell in an angry voice, just a voice caught in the moment. And I did stop. But somewhere between my hazy daydream and the sudden call from the outside world, I forgot to push in the clutch. The truck jerked and bucked. The trailer jerked and bucked. The load heaved and buckled. It toppled onto my father. The bales were not empty cans. I felt their weight as I watched my father stumble and disappear underneath them.

"Damn sure work the clutch when you hit the brake." He said it every hay-hauling season from then on. I did not mind it. I imagined they would be my father's dying words to me. It was a little joke we shared.

But the summer I turned eleven I was not driving. I had been promoted. "Hauling hay ain't much of a skill, but it'll get you through the lean times," my father said as I pulled on my work gloves. "Hay needs hauling every year. It ain't ever going to stop growing." We had been hauling other men's hay every summer since I could remember. Whenever my father could get a day off, we would drive to some other ranch's back pasture to haul and stack hay used to feed the herds through winter. I wanted to ask my father when our lean times were going to end.

That morning, I was flipping bales and rolling them closer to the trailer for my father. I was even bucking them up onto the flatbed, at least the ones at the beginning of the load. Those only needed to be lifted three feet off the ground to make it to the trailer bed. Otherwise, I would run ahead of the old green Ford in my high-tops, the soles slick with the juice of crushed alfalfa stocks, and I would tilt each bale on its side back to my knees just like my father had taught me.

"If there's a rattler underneath that thing and you roll toward the trailer, it's going to get you. You tilt it back to you first, and that snake isn't going to get nothing but hay," he had said.

I thought my father must have gone to a hundred years of school to know something like that. So I tilted each bale back to me and peered over the edge, looking for snakes, rats and tarantulas. My fingers sweated and twitched in my gloves. Sweat ran into my eyes, but I didn't dare take my hands off the bale. I needed them for whatever was hiding under there waiting to bite me.

I found a dead mouse that day. I wished it had been alive, so I could show my father that it hadn't scared me. I could have picked it up by its tail, run back to the trailer, and tried to drop it on my father's neck as he bent down to grab the next bale. We might have laughed, and my father would have found some way to tell me to push the clutch when I used the brake. But it was just a dead mouse, no good to anybody.

I thought about showing Gina the dead mouse. She was driving the truck for us. It was her father's hay that we were hauling. She was big and ugly, but all the cowboys said she was one tough heifer. They even let her dehorn the fresh loads of cattle from Florida. I couldn't have imagined my mother—I didn't have a sister—cutting off those yearling's tiny horns with that long, mean-looking pair of break-overs. It was a messy job. She stood in the heat with the rest of them, covered in blood, just doing her job, not talking and not smiling. I was always jealous of the way she could work, how she could ignore the butterflies and the dogs and not hear the frogs that lived in the mud that circled the water tub.

In the end, I decided not to show Gina the mouse. It didn't seem messy enough for her. Besides, I knew even then that in the truck cab you played with your imaginations, and Gina looked like she was thinking about something very far away.

I spent that day running ahead of our old truck, flipping bales. The shirt I was wearing had been worn out by my father. The sun poured through material so thin it felt like silk. My shoulders, neck and arms burned red. A random breeze would pull the sweat-soaked shirt from my shoulders, and I would shiver for a brief second under the sun. The alfalfa was everywhere. It found its way into every opening in my clothing. The bits of hay would scratch and itch into every tight spot on my body. I could feel the hard work turning me into a man.

We stopped when the sun got too low. We stacked the last load of bales in the barn, unhitched the trailer, and watched Gina walk down the fence to her house. We climbed into the old Ford for our own long ride home. I loved riding alone with my father. He never said much when he was working, and he didn't say much when other cowboys were around. But on those hot and bumpy rides back home my father would talk to me until the Ford's headlights swung onto our front door.

He would tell me stories about high school, breaking broncs, trapping coyotes, hunting deer, and fighting. My father would listen to me too. I would tell him that I almost had to kick some kid's ass for one thing or another, though usually it never happened. I knew my father didn't always believe me, but he still smiled and laughed and said, "You should of punched him right in his damn eye," and then he would add, "Don't tell your mother I told you that." There were actually two things I expected from my father's dying lips: "Use the clutch when you brake" and "Don't tell your mother I told you that."

It was still hot. The smell of sweat, Copenhagen, hay and heat made riding in the cab feel like breathing through a burlap bag. I pushed my face out the window and let the wind blow through my hair. I watched my hand float on the air and prayed for a flat tire or a busted radiator to make the trip home just a little longer.

"My science teacher, Mrs. Christian, wants to buy rattlesnake rattlers and cow skulls from me. She's gonna pay three dollars for good sized rattlers and fifteen dollars a head for skulls," I said.

I had saved that news all day.

"You'd best ride down to the draw where we drag the kills," my father said. "See if you can't find any skulls. More than likely, the coyotes drug 'em off. You'll have to cast about a little further down the draw. I'll damn sure keep a look out for rattlers. I might have one or two up at the barn."

I would not ride down to the draw. I would walk down. My horse was a wicked monster, and he hated me. His name was Eb, short for Everyday Bay. My father gave him to me on my tenth birthday. We had Eb years before he was given to me. But after that birthday, I had to brush Eb every time my father used him for work. Eb also became the only horse I was allowed to ride when I helped my father. Whenever I rode him, Eb would run, buck me off, and then try to stamp my head into the ground with two giant front hooves. I would roll and duck and wait for him to lope over to the horse trailer. I would walk back to the rest of the cowboys, puffing and wiping my eyes, and take my shame. Then I'd have to climb back onto Eb and get to work.

"Jim White said that his dad had to shoot their dog because it killed a newborn calf," I said.

I watched my hand float along the air just behind the side-view mirror. I liked the way the wind eased the itching and stinging on my wrists. When I felt my father's eyes on me, I pulled my hand back inside the cab, but he kept looking at me. I hadn't yet figured out what was kid stuff and what was cowboy stuff. I hated it when my father caught me acting like a kid. It was not the hard look, it was that I knew if I concentrated enough I could figure out how to be a cowboy around my father. I knew I was getting better. I was starting to take my whippings like a man—my father told me that the last time he had swatted me. But I still wanted Oreos after supper. I hadn't won too many fights yet, and I sometimes cried a little when Eb threw me.

My father was still staring at me, but my hand was back in the cab, grabbing my knee. He wasn't angry. He had something to say about Jim White. I could see it in his eyes. My father's eyes looked different for different situations. They were light blue when he was drinking his first cup of coffee in the morning. They were grey when he talked serious business. They were almost green when he was angry. That night, his eyes said he was talking business, that he was talking herds, rain or politics. He had never looked at me with those eyes before, and I thought I just might have turned into a cowboy at that very second. After all, I had put at least thirteen bales onto the trailer by myself.

I imagined my father was about to tell me how sometimes you have to shoot the things you love to help them, like in the movie *Old Yeller*. And I would say, "Yup, it sure was darned hard to do it, but that's what men did. And we were men, by God, so we had to do it."

I had hoped he would say, “You’re a man now. Good job on them bales, and I’m glad you understand that men have to do serious things that hurt a little.” But my father didn’t say that.

The road noise from the mud tires buzzed through my ears. I felt every bump on that old dirt road. I placed my hand on the armrest and dug my palm into the cracked vinyl. I started to squirm but forced myself to stop. I was desperately afraid that the wind noise and the old truck’s squeaks and rattles wouldn’t allow me to hear what my father was going to say. He stared at me forever. He looked at me as serious as I had ever seen my father look at any man, and he said, “That’s as wrong as two boys fucking. You don’t kill a dog because it got a hold of a calf. It should be Jimmy’s father shot for leaving that dog to kill that calf.”

“That’s what I told him, that’s as wrong as two boys fucking,” I said quickly. It was the first time I had used any form of the word *fuck* in front of my father. I stumbled over it a little, and I hoped he hadn’t noticed.

My hand started for the window, but I caught it and stuck it on my knee. My father opened a can of Copenhagen, pinched a dip, and jammed it in his lower lip with a thick finger. “They say that once a dog gets a taste of live beef, then it won’t do nothing but try to kill another calf as soon as it gets a chance, but it ain’t so. You don’t shoot a dog.”

“That’s what I told Jimmy,” I lied.

My father had given me a dip about a year ago. It burned and stung and tasted horrible. I spat it out on the dirt. He told me not to waste good dip like that and made me pick it up and put it back into my mouth. The wad of dip broke apart when it hit the dirt. It was slobbery and muddy, and there were tiny bits of hay in the mess. He wouldn't let me pick them out. I felt my hand move to my mouth, felt the tobacco, mud and juice smear across my stinging lips, and then it was in my mouth.

The other cowboys saw it happen. I tried not to cry, but I couldn't stop. My throat burned, and the more I cried the more it burned. I swallowed the dip just to get the taste out of my mouth, but it and my lunch came back up again. Luckily, my father had walked away as soon as I started crying.

I watched my father's face in that hot cab and said, "My friend, Brent, said his uncle was a faggot and that there wasn't nothing wrong with it." I thought it might be a grown-up thing to say. I dug the toe of my shoe into a groove worn into the truck's floorboard and tapped my hand on my knee.

"Don't you hang around Brent no more. Faggot runs in the blood," my father said, nodding his head in one quick, strong motion. It was what he did when he had said his last word on a subject. I was trying very hard to understand what he meant and to think of something else to say, when he got a hazy look in his eyes and said, "I'd as soon shoot a faggot as look at one." Then his eyes grew sharp again. "You go to school tomorrow, and you punch Brent right in his faggot face and tell him to keep his dick-loving hands away from you. You hear me?"

I eased my hand out the window again and let it float in slow ups and downs behind the giant mirror. I wondered if my dad would really kill me if I was gay, though I didn't think I was. My wrists weren't limp, they were strong. I hadn't looked at anybody below the waist when I went into the school bathrooms. I hadn't played with my thing but two or three times, and Shawn said that his dad said that it wasn't faggy to play with it anyway.

But if I was? I wondered if my dad would shoot me on the spot. I scrunched up against the side door wanting only to find a daydream place and think about racing cars or robbing banks, but I couldn't.

"Did you hear me, boy?"

I pulled my hand back inside. "I heard you, Dad. I'll punch him right in his fucking faggot face."

But I knew that I wouldn't. I was too scared of Brent. He had beaten me up three months ago. There was no way I could beat him up the next day, no matter how many bales I had thrown. Besides, Brent was my friend. My father nodded a strong nod and said, "If I hear you say *fuck* one more time, I'm gonna swat you. I didn't say nothing before, but you'd better watch your mouth. You ain't old enough to cuss like that yet."

My hand crept out the window again. I had seen coyotes shot. I had gone deer hunting twice with my father. I had killed seven rattlesnakes with the .22 rifle that my father had given me for Christmas, but I could not imagine what I would look like with a bullet in my head. I wondered if my dad would shoot me in the head or the heart. I had seen a lot of movies, and people got shot in both places about equally.

I worked the sentence out two or three times in my head before I said it. I straightened up, wiped the sweat off my forehead, and stuck one thumb in my belt loop the way I had seen my dad do when he was going to say something important. I tried to catch his eyes, but he was watching the road.

"Dad, if I was to say howdy to Brent now and again would you shoot me because I was turning faggot, or would you just swat me good like when I got real angry and smashed that window?"

My father finally looked at me. I gave him my most serious face. I squinted my eyes and tilted my head to the left like I was offering a pretty good deal. My father coughed out a laugh. He looked into the review mirror and then out his window at the pasture. "I don't guess I'd have to shoot you, but you might not be sitting down comfortable until you graduate, boy. You just might not at that."

I nodded my head and turned to look at the pasture moving past my window. "By God, I'm a man, and that's what men do," I whispered as I ran my hand along the armrest.

A small cool wind blew into the cab. It lifted the hair off my forehead. I turned my wrists to the wind and washed them in the rushing air. We rode in silence the rest of the way home. When the Ford rattled to a stop in front of our gate, I opened the old door and slid out. I crunched in slow steps through the gravel driveway, allowing my father to enter the house ahead of me.

5

Killing the Baby Seals

You can never forget that you're in the Army. You can wear the most expensive civilian clothes and shoes or wear an earring and not shave when you're off-duty and off base, but wherever you go, whatever mirror you use, you still have a haircut that looks like a dog's ass. You still wake up in a barracks room. Whatever posters you hang on the wall, whatever carpet freshener you use, whatever colour your toilet bowl scrubber, the room still feels, smells and looks Army. It's numbing. It's all "Yes, Sergeant" and "No, Sir," until you reach the point, that vague land between voluntary defeat and insanity, when you begin to run the words together and "Yes, no, Sergeant, Sir," sounds like the correct answer to any question, military or otherwise.

The phone rang.

"Sergeant Jones, this is Sergeant First Class Jones. I'm the CQ Sergeant today. A Private Reilly in your squad was supposed to be my runner today. He's late. Where is he?"

"Hello?" I said again. I liked to do that to them when they called before eight o'clock on Saturday morning.

"Private Reilly is late. That means he's AWOL, and that means you're wrong. Do I need to call your platoon sergeant and ask him why his squad leader doesn't know where his soldiers are?"

"No, Sergeant. I'll find him." I hung up the phone, turned on the light, and grabbed a wrinkled green and brown uniform off the floor. I put it on, ached into my boots, and went one floor down to Reilly's room.

I pounded on Reilly's door. "Get the fuck up, Private Reilly. Unlock this door and get your ass out here. Let's go, you're late." I heard somebody get out of bed. The door unlocked. His roommate, some private from another platoon, answered the door. He was all "Yes, Sergeant, no, Sergeant," but he still sounded like he believed in it. He said that Reilly had spent the night at a friend's house off base. The private had a phone number. I took it. He gave me one last, "Yes, Sergeant," and closed the door with a stifled yawn. First I had to find a replacement at the desk for Reilly. Then I had to find Reilly. Idiot. He wasn't lazy or evil. I think he had even volunteered to do CQ duty. He probably forgot about it. Christ, they have got to stop putting these farm boys in uniform.

I had about five minutes before the asshole down at the desk went over my head. I had to get somebody down there to fill in for the farm boy. There is a saying in the Army: "Never stand when you can sit, never sit when you can sleep." I had my own version, and I thought that it was time to teach it to a new soldier in my squad. I went to Blocker's room and knocked on the door. And, just like I knew he would, he answered. He was shining his boots, and he still had the green wool Army blanket on his bed. God bless new soldiers.

"Get into your uniform and put those pretty boots on, Blocker. You just volunteered to do CQ," I said.

He didn't get it. "But Sergeant, I didn't volun—"

"You opened your door, didn't you? Get into your uniform and I'll teach you something." He took a uniform out of his wall locker that was so starched and new it looked like a steam-rolled bush.

I sat down on that cheese-grater wool they pass off as a blanket. "You weren't expecting anybody this early on a Saturday morning were you, Private Blocker?"

"No, Sergeant."

"So why'd you answer the door?"

He looked at me like I was crazy as he tucked a brown T-shirt into his pants. "Because you knocked."

"Do your friends knock on your door this early on the weekend?"

"No, Sergeant." The kid had pictures of Porsches taped to the wall above his bed. Christ. He was sliding into boots so shiny they weren't black anymore. They were the nasty grey of the ceiling.

"Does your girlfriend come over to touch your dick this early on a Saturday morning?"

He was starting to get the point. "No, Sergeant."

"Who would knock on your door this early on a Saturday morning?"

He buttoned his camouflage blouse down the front. "I guess only you, Sergeant Jones."

"Do you like me, Private Blocker?"

"Yes, Sergeant," he said. He took a step back.

"Do you like me well enough to hang out with me on a Saturday morning?"

He took another step back. "I guess, I mean—"

"No, you don't like me well enough to hang out with me on Saturday morning, Private Blocker." I tried a new approach. "If I knocked and you didn't answer the door, would I know if you were in this room?" I waved a tired arm across a jungle of Army issue beds, desks and wall-lockers.

"No, Sergeant." Now we were getting somewhere.

"If I knock on your door on a Saturday morning, it probably means I want you to do something on your day off, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Do you like working on your day off?"

"No, Sergeant."

"Then why in the hell did you answer the door?" He knew he didn't have the correct answer, and he was confused and a little tense. It wasn't a yes or no question, so I let him off the hook. "Don't answer the door on a Saturday morning unless you're expecting to fuck or meet a friend, OK? That's an order. Now get dressed and get down to the desk."

"Yes, Sergeant," he said. I closed the door behind me. Blocker had bought me and Reilly maybe another thirty minutes. The door opened. He was standing there in such torment that I couldn't fuck with him any longer.

"Don't worry, Blocker. It's only going to be for an hour. You'll still be able meet your family this afternoon. They're coming in at one o'clock, right?" He nodded at me like he didn't believe me, but he knew he couldn't do anything about it. "Now get down to the desk and tell Sergeant First Class Jones that I said you're filling in for Reilly."

He double-timed down the hall and faded around the corner.

You walk around these halls so much that you know where you are just by the black Kiwi and gun-oil stains on the carpet. The room numbers are eye level, but you quit holding your head up when you're alone about the second year in. You have to hold it up so often in formations and inspections that raising it for no reason at all seems like insanity. You get to know the floors. You memorize the ground, the front and back of people's boots. The triangle of space that extends from the top of your head to the spot on the ground four feet in front of you becomes as familiar as home. You climb the stairs, hang a left, walk thirty-six steps, and stop. You know by the boot marks on the brass kick plate that you're in front of your room. You don't even remember what the room number is. You haven't seen it in a year.

They had promoted me a year and half earlier. They gave me three stripes and a squad of ten soldiers. My daily performance and test scores, ability to do pushups and run the three miles around the golf course, and the skill with which I killed green plastic pop-up targets in both summer and winter had been superior to my peers'. They had made me, a ranch boy from Amarillo, a leader. They gave me all the fuck-ups to prove myself. They said if I could make the fat guys thin, the slow guys fast, the dumb guys smart, if I could make the civilians military, then they'd promote me to Staff Sergeant that much faster. I wasn't used to the new weight of three stripes. I couldn't imagine what four felt like, but it sounded good.

So I ran fat Private Van Tassell around the golf course twice a day for six months. He never lost any weight, but I got to know him. He fell in love with the first person he fucked, and then she broke up with him. His grandmother died. He shot expert at the rifle range for the first time. He learned a few guitar chords.

"Come on, Van Tassell, we got one more mile." It was unbelievable. He had improved his two-mile run time by an entire minute. He had logged over a hundred miles in the month. He was working out three times a day, but he still weighed the same two hundred pounds. I was going to have to start eating every meal with him, but the bastard would just sneak a candy bar here and there during the day. He probably had a Snickers shoved in his shorts. If that bulge had been his dick, maybe she wouldn't have dumped him.

"Let's go, Van Tassell."

"I run better with a cadence, Sergeant," he said.

Actually, he didn't. It was evening, and the sun was getting just low enough to make the path around the golf course turn from pitch black to fuzzy light as it twisted through the stands of trees lining the fairways. I hadn't noticed that beautiful play of light and shadow for over a year, and I had run the same path at the same time every day. I had seen it so much that it didn't exist for me anymore. The back of Van Tassell's fat head would disappear as we entered the tiny forests and then reemerge in the clearings between tee boxes. Trying not to concentrate on his massive head, I rediscovered the trees.

If Van Tassell thought he ran better with a cadence, then it was my job to prove that he didn't.

"My wife and kids all hate me," I began in an Army sergeant's voice, picking up the pace and running ahead of him so that his head wouldn't block my view.

"My wife and kids all hate me," Van Tassell repeated. He increased his pace. I wondered how long he could keep it up. The trees were coming faster.

"My dog tried to leave me," I continued.

"My dog tried to leave me." He was too busy singing to complain. The Army had something brilliant in these running cadences.

"Because I make my living, killing the baby seals!" I was starting to get into it. I liked the cadence because it had nothing to do with the Army. There was no Airborne Ranger shit or any push-up and First Sergeant references.

"Because I make my living, killing the baby seals," Van Tassell puffed. It sounded like he was getting into it too. The trees were rolling along.

"Smash 'em, bash 'em, roto-till 'em, any ol' way you wanna kill 'em," I screamed, increasing the pace again. I wanted to see the next trees. I needed the next light to break through the next clearing. The sun was getting too low. We had only a few more shifts in light ahead of us. I wanted to get them all in.

Van Tassell was right there with me. "Smash 'em, bash 'em, roto-till 'em, any ol' way you wanna kill 'em." He was running at a six-minute-mile pace, and he didn't even know it. Glorious. Maybe this was the turning point. Just maybe he would start shedding the pounds, and I could concentrate on the other fuck-ups.

"That's how I make my living! Killing the baby seals!" I was out of cadence and we still had over three quarters of a mile to go.

"That's how I make my living! Killing the baby seals! One more time Sergeant," Van Tassell said between two long breaths. He was in the zone. I wasn't about to let him drop. We must have sung that song twenty more times that day, running in the darkness. It was the fastest he ever got around the golf course.

They kicked him out six months later.

Van Tassell had asked me for a month's leave over the Christmas holiday. I declined it, so he went to the platoon sergeant. They approved it because they knew he would come back from vacation weighing more than he did when he left. They could kick him out for that. They had never really expected me to turn Van Tassell around. They just wanted to see if I would give up on him. They wanted to see how far I would go for the next stripe. I hadn't given up, so Van Tassell was useless to them. They were looking to kick him out.

I explained this to Van Tassell. I couldn't quite beg him not to go, but I explained it over and over again. They would already have the paperwork written up. They would weigh him the same day he got back.

He didn't get it. He thought they were human, that they thought he was human. He would just say, "Don't worry, Sergeant. I got it under control. I'll come back weighing ten less pounds, you'll see. I'll make you proud."

Pride didn't have a fucking thing to do with it. I couldn't explain that to him in any way that he would understand. He came back weighing fifteen pounds more than when he left. He had gained half a pound a day for every day he was home. That had to be some kind of record. I smile when I think about it now.

I can't remember his first name.

You get to see so many of them, they come and go so often, that you can tell who they are, whether they're good or bad, by the way they shine their boots, iron their uniforms, or stand in formation. You don't bother to learn their names. You teach them how to be cynical and self-sufficient enough so that you don't have to worry about them, and then you concentrate on the next fuck-up. One by one, you remove their innocence. You do it so often that you forget why. You do it so often that you can't explain how you do it. It becomes as natural as putting on your boots.

Van Tassell was gone, and Reilly had one foot out the door. I had learned a thousand tricks in the Army: how to get out of duty, how to write a person up without getting them into too much trouble, how not to write somebody up and still punish them, how to get somebody a four-day pass. I knew how to make everybody aware of the Army, but I couldn't make them aware of themselves. Reilly was fucked. I could save him today, but what about the next day? And the next? He probably needed to be saved from me. I needed to be saved from me, but first I had to figure out what to do about Reilly.

Standing in front of Blocker's room, I was one floor down and a couple of right turns from my room. I couldn't decide whether to go down one more flight of stairs, face SFC Jones, and call Reilly from the CQ desk or go up and use the phone in my room. The fluorescent light at the end of Blocker's hall had burned out again. I hadn't noticed it on the way to his room, but now the break in the lighting was frustrating. I didn't have the time to fix it, but I didn't know what I was going to do anyway. I was there, I figured I might as well change the bulb or I would hear about it during Monday's inspection. I passed from light to dark to light on the stained carpet, went one floor up to the supply closet, grabbed a bulb and a ladder, and went back down to change the bulb. The bulbs are four feet long and they're awkward as hell to put in. I couldn't quite jam it in and was cussing when Sergeant First Class Jones came around the corner.

"Where's Reilly?" he asked. I could see my reflection in his boots, an awkward green figure holding what looked like an enormous glowing dick in his hands.

"I don't know, Sergeant," I said. I turned towards the ceiling, trying to jam the damn tube in its place.

"You don't know?" he repeated.

"I gave him the day off. I told him to go get drunk and get laid." The tube slipped in, finally.

"You what? Is Blocker covering the entire shift for him?"

I climbed down the ladder, grabbed the burnt tube and faced him. "No," I said.

"No?"

I didn't know what he wanted. "No, Sergeant First Class Jones?"

He didn't want the title. He wanted to know who was going to clean the toilets and take out the trash. "Who then, Sergeant Jones?"

"Me."

"You?"

Again, I wasn't sure what he wanted. "Me, Sergeant?"

"No," he said.

"Why?"

"Sergeants don't clean bathrooms."

"My entire squad is out," I lied.

"Out?"

"Out, Sergeant. I'll cover for Reilly. Where's Blocker?"

"He's out with the other runner shining kick-plates for the inspection," Sergeant First Class Jones said. "You can't cover for him. Blocker will pull his duty today. I'm calling your platoon sergeant. You're in deep shit, Sergeant Jones."

You reach that point, the point where part of you wants to scream but the other part of you wants to lie down and die. You're stuck. The only thing that gets you moving is a half-assed attempt at saving your dignity. It doesn't really do anything for your self-respect, but it turns out to be enough to get you moving, to get you back in the race—however slow you're running.

"Damn it, Randy, lighten up," I said to the back of his head.

Sergeant First Class Jones disappeared down the stairs. I had to find Blocker and get him off base. If they got him before I did, he wouldn't get to see his parents. I ran a lap around the second floor, nothing. I climbed the stairs, the third floor, my floor, nothing. He had to be down on the first floor. Two flights down and I was there, running down the halls. At each corner I would glare down the hallway and see nothing. Finally, I found him in the day-room playing pool with the other private. Blocker, fucking around on duty. Who would've guessed.

"Private Blocker, you're relieved. Get up to your room, change, and get off base. Leave by the south entrance, the one with the flag case. Don't let anybody see you." I was out of breath, and he looked like he thought I was cussing him out for playing pool. I told him again and hustled him out of the day-room.

"But Sergeant, who's gonna help me clean the doors?" the other private whined.

"You have the day off too. Get out of here." Why not? I was going down anyway.

I had to get my Platoon Sergeant on the phone, if he wasn't already in the barracks. He lived only a block away. I didn't know what lie I could come up with, but I had to try. I hit the stairwell and sprinted up three flights. Out the door and damn, they had cleaned the kick-plates on the third floor already. Which of those doors was mine? 326? 362? 312? 321? The fucking place with all four corners, all doors, exactly the same, the same fire extinguishers at the same location on every wing. "Shit!" I lived thirty-six steps, head down, from the staircase, but which staircase? I ran back down to the first floor, sprinted to the north door, the door I used to come into the building everyday. I turn left. Shit! No, that was Bodenhamer and the other Jones. Straight, yeah straight. "Fuck!" Straight was the mail room and Reilly. Left, yes, left was me, Blocker, and Robinson. Up two. No, damn it, three. Three, hit the door, turn right. Right? No, left. Right was Robinson, left was me. I was me. Thirty-six steps. One, two, three, four, my dog tried to leave me, eleven, twelve, thirteen, my wife and kids all hate me, twenty-three, twenty-four, smash 'em, bash 'em, roto-till 'em, thirty, thirty-one, killing the baby seals. Turn right, bam! 317. Key, lock, home! I picked up the phone. Fuck it. "What am I doing?" I dropped the phone and fell onto the bed.

Protecting my men from themselves and the Army had become such a habit that I'd started doing it for no good reason. Christ, I had become that kid who spent three hours the night before shining his boots just so he could watch them get scuffed to hell during the first one hundred yards of a five-mile road march. I was the kid who stayed up all night studying for the promotion board and then overslept and missed the whole damn thing.

I had answered my door on a fucking Saturday morning.

No more.

But the wheels were spinning on this one. Me, Reilly, Blocker, the other kid, we were going to be crushed. And I put us there. I could walk down to the CQ desk, tell my story, and wait for the shit to come down. They would take my squad, give me a desk job. I could sit and wait for the end of my enlistment, misfiling paperwork and stealing office supplies the entire time.

Or I could find some other private hanging around the barracks on his day off and pay him twenty bucks to cover Reilly's shift. Twenty bucks got you a cheese pizza and some beer at the base store. It wasn't the best way to spend a Saturday night, but it was better than spending a Saturday night without beer and pizza. And it would be enough to get some poor kid to give up his day off.

I turned off the light and left the room, checking the room number as I closed the door behind me. I looked at the gleaming kick-plate at my feet and kicked a long black smear across it, just in case.

Who We Left In Amarillo

"Slow down, Charlene."

Nothing. The sunlight shoots off the old cracks in our windshield and makes me blink in the back seat.

"Slow down."

Nothing. It is hot summer air, and the windows are closed.

"Slow down, Charlene."

Eric grabs my hand. I wasn't listening to the screaming before, but it is different now. Dad is whispering, and the car is moving faster. The green numbers on the dash say 115 mph. I have never seen cars move so fast toward us. I feel it in my stomach and squeeze my brother's hand.

***

My dad is fat and bald now. He is not dangerous. He is not dangerous to me. Eleven years since last contact. He steps out of the car, waves to me at the top of some metal stairs. He stands in the humidity then shrugs and walks and shrugs and walks and hugs me. His hands are still huge. He could hurt me if he wanted.

"So?" he says.

"So. Yeah. So." I am shuffling in the heat.

"How's your brother?"

"Eric? Eric is Eric."

"How's your mother?"

"Good." She hasn't been punched in the face in a while. "Where did you want to go to eat?"

"Fruits and salads."

"What?"

"My doctor says fruits and salads. My body began rejecting my ungodly lifestyle a long time ago. I've been on more meds and in more hospital beds than Keith Richards." It's a politician's laugh. It is a convert's laugh. He didn't use to have the salesman chitter-chatter. The tacky comment makes him seem less evil. But I can still feel the hug—his arms around me.

***

I am terrorizing my little brother. He is crying and running around the house.

"I'm going to get you. I'm going to kill you. I'm locking you in the closet." He's crying now. His blond hair and fat cheeks are shaking. He's wearing a Michael Jackson *Beat It* shirt. He runs down the hall into the living room. I lose sight of him around the corner, but I hear it. Fist, face or elbow? What did he hit it with? Fist, face or elbow? The glass is shattered. We are done.

"You made me!" He is crying, holding his elbow, and sitting in the middle of thousands of smoked-glass shards.

"Yeah, I know. Let's pick it up before Mom gets home." But I mean before Dad gets home, and I'd cry too if I wasn't so scared. Our hands are shaking, picking the glass bits out of the carpet and from between the Rolling Stones records stacked at the bottom of the stereo cabinet. Eric cuts his fingers. We don't think to use the vacuum. We pick and drop, pick and drop shattered glass into a brown paper Safeway bag. We don't talk. We shake. We squat in dirty socks, afraid of the end of the day.

***

My brother's hand is sticky. Dad is scared. Mom's hands are tight on the wheel. I can see them next to the numbers 116 mph, 117 mph, 118 mph.

"Charlene, slow down. I'm not going to do anything, just slow down."

I've never seen him scared before. I've seen all of the rest of us scared a bunch of times, never him. I didn't think he could be scared, he scared us so much. Mom is weaving through traffic. She is going too fast to stay in one lane. Left lane, middle lane, left lane. Left lane, middle lane, right lane, middle lane. Other drivers stare at us when we pass them. Mom isn't saying anything. I wasn't paying attention. I don't know why she is driving so fast. They were screaming, that was all. I hope we don't crash. I can see her hand. I can see her hair. It is the same color as Eric's hair. One-hundred-nineteen mph, we are still in our pajamas.

***

He works at the Salvation Army in San Antonio.

"The best thing I ever did was leave Amarillo. It was the fucking desert." Chicken salad, no dressing, he's talking to me through some lettuce. I hate myself for having thought the same thing. I have left Amarillo too, and it is a desert.

He has come to Austin to talk to a relapsed heroin addict living in a tent behind some bushes just off the highway. He works at the Salvation Army men's shelter. I got his number from his mother a year ago. It was a surprise phone call.

"I knew one of you would call sometime," he had said.

We exchanged a couple of letters. Then, he's coming to town to talk a homeless addict into returning to the program. I started the entire thing, first phone call, first letter. He says he's coming. I take the day off work and clean my apartment. We hug on the stairs. He never comes inside. I never started the whole thing thinking I'd see him so soon. Even a year later is too fast, but I don't do anything to stop it.

***

Mom is home. My brother's cuts are bandaged. She kissed his elbow. The glass shards are in the garbage, and the records are not scratched. We are at the table eating macaroni and cheese. She is not angry, and I think she does not know what is coming. I can see it coming.

But, she must see it coming too. When I drop the glass of purple Kool-Aid on the carpet in the living room, she screams at me.

"Why are you so stupid?! Why did you do that?" She grabs a rag and runs from the kitchen to the carpet to try and wipe it up. I try to say I am sorry, but she pushes me away to get to the stain. I know not to cry, but I can't not. I am too scared.

"Why are you crying? I'm the one that's going to get it." And I know it, and I cry harder. She is crying. Eric is scared. He is standing behind Mom, crossing his arms and swinging them at his waist. He wants to be hugged and held.

"Why can't you just do one thing right? Why?"

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"It's not good enough, Sean. It's just not good enough." She looks me in the eyes, and then she drops her head back to the stain. "I know. I know. It's OK," she says as her hair swings back and forth over my mistake. I do not believe her. It is not OK, and Dad is not home yet.

"Take care of your brother and just sit on the couch. Don't say anything when he comes home. Don't do anything. Can you just take care of your brother? Don't touch anything."

"I won't, Mom."

***

"Why are we zipping? Is Mom late?"

"Yes, we're zipping because Mom is late."

"Is Dad late too?"

"Yes."

Mom has not turned the air-conditioner on. It is hot. Eric is squirming. He is starting to complain. I try to whisper to him, but he knows we are going fast. He knows we are zipping, and that is what he is saying.

Dad is telling Mom to slow down. I am holding my brother's hands. The car is moving forward fast. Mom hits the brakes. Left lane, middle lane, right lane. We drive down a road off the highway. The light is yellow, but she runs it. She does not want to stop yet. I don't want her to stop yet. Something will happen when she stops. Eric is crying now. He is hot and scared. My hand is over his mouth, and his eyes are big. She can't drive forever.

***

"The Army gives me a little apartment. I don't spend my money on much of anything but movies. I go to the movies every week."

"Yeah, I remember we used to go to the movies a lot."

"Tell your brother to give me a call."

"I'll give him your number." I have given him the number. He doesn't want it. He has decided not to talk to Dad. I wonder what Eric remembers and what he doesn't.

"Tell your mother I said hello." This is said between bites of salad. It is profane. I cannot tell him that. "If you need anything, just let me know. I have lots of money. The Army takes care of all my medical bills."

He is eating salad because he has to lose weight before the next operation. His esophagus is too narrow. It was crushed in a motorcycle accident. He cannot breathe correctly. They will cut off his jaw, pull it forward, and wire it back on. He is still eating his salad. The last surgery opened his nasal cavity. He says it gave him two black eyes, that he looked like a raccoon. He laughs around some lettuce.

My mother's excuses for black eyes: Wind caught the car door and it blew into my face. The soccer ball caught me in the nose. I slipped in the snow. I slipped in the rain. I walked into a glass patio door. There are two bumps in my mother's crooked nose. Dad put them there. I am still not protecting her.

***

Dad hasn't come home. We are going to bed. We are in pajamas. We are free until tomorrow.

"Sorry, Mom."

"It's OK."

We are in the hallway between our bedrooms. She is taking Eric to his room. We all hear the door. Dad is home. The plastic soles of Eric's pajamas scrape the floor as he runs to get a hug from Dad. I'm watching him from the hallway, stuck. Dad hugs Eric, swings him. Mom walks fast to the kitchen to fix a plate. I stare at him, stuck and alone on the far end of the hall.

"Why is he staring at me?" He points at me. But he has raised his voice for Mom to hear.

"He just hasn't seen you all day, Kevin. That's all. They miss you."

"It's past their bedtime, isn't it?"

"Go to bed, Sean. Take Eric." Mom yells it from the kitchen.

I wake up to glass breaking and screaming.

"You can't keep them away from the stereo? What the hell do you do? How can you be so fucking stupid? Maybe if I let them break your shit. How about this? You keep them away from this, though, don't you?" There is a crash. Eric is up and in my room. I chase him all day, and he runs to me at night. I hate him for it, and I squeeze his hand too hard when he grabs mine.

"Kevin, just calm down." And that's it. That was what it took. I feel her hit the floor. It was a loud one.

"Don't ever tell me to calm down."

Eric is crying. My hand is over his mouth.

"Shhh." I whisper into his ear, then I cover his head with my hands.

"Get up and pick this shit up." I have made this happen. But it is short and over.

"What is that? Did you piss yourself?"

"I couldn't hold it. When you—"

"When I what? Are you a fucking child? Jesus, you are a filthy cunt. You're just fucking useless."

"Kevin, they'll hear."

"I don't care what they hear. Where do they think the money comes from to buy what they break everyday. It doesn't come from their retarded mother." He has raised his voice. He is talking to us. I drag Eric to the closet and hide with him behind the hanging clothes. I hold him.

"Kevin, I'm sorry." I hate her for saying she's sorry. I hate her for it. I want to scream that it's my fault, but I'm too scared.

***

She is driving too fast down streets with houses on them. I recognize the neighborhood. Dad's friend lives here, and we are dropping him off. There is a stop sign, but she drives through it. A car honks at us. Eric whispers to me that she didn't stop. I shake my head that I know and not to say anything. We are only some houses away. I know we will be stopping soon.

***

Mom gets us out of the closet. She has been crying, and her eyes are puffy. She puts me to bed. I cry and whisper that I am sorry. I grab for her hair and touch it. She whispers good night and starts to take Eric to bed.

"Mom, why do retarded people pee their pants?" Eric whispers on the way out the door.

***

"I don't blame her for what she did," my father says. I am stuck to the seat. I am still a child. "I probably had it coming."

"Probably." I say it out loud. His eyes light up, and I see the danger for the first time. He looks like he wants to stab me with his fork. I have brought him back.

***

There is the house. Now she goes slow. We are rolling down the block. There are green trees in the yard. There is a fast red car in the driveway. We are not moving anymore. Something loud. Mom's hands are not on the wheel anymore. They are on her face.

"You deserved that," Dad says. "You know you did."

"Yes. I know I did." Her hair has fallen over the hands on her face. She has whispered. Eric's eyes are filled with tears. They are huge. Dad has raised his hand again.

"Stop hitting mommy!" My brother has yelled it, and he is crying. Mom is yelling now too.

"Get out, bastard. Get out. Get out!" She is screaming and honking the horn and screaming. Dad is fast and he is gone. The door is slammed, and he is into the house. He has not hit Mom again. Eric has stopped him. Mom cries and punches the wheel. When she turns around her eyes are red, and she is really mad. I reach out to touch her hair but she pushes me back.

"We're getting away from here." She is not talking to us. She is looking straight ahead.

"Can we go to Grandma's house?" Eric asks, crying a little. I don't tell him to whisper. I want to go to Grandma's house too.

***

"You should tell your brother to call me sometimes, your mother too."

"Yeah."

"Hey, Sean. Whatever happens, I'm still your father. Remember that."

"Yeah," I say. When Mom doesn't like what I'm doing, she reminds me how much I look like my father. He pays the bill and drops me off at the bottom of the stairs to my apartment.

"Give me a call sometime." And a wave and gone. I am alone.

***

Her face is swollen. She has a knot on the side of her head. She looks scary, and I breathe in hard when she wakes me. It feels like minutes since she took us from the closet.

"Get your brother up. Grab some clothes. Keep quiet and don't wake up your dad." I sneak into Eric's room to wake him up. I place my hand over his mouth and whisper in his ear. He doesn't move. I keep my hand over his mouth and shake him a little. He doesn't move. I pinch him on the shoulder. He wakes up and bites me on the palm. I pull my hand back fast and hit him before I think about it. He screams. We are caught. Mom rushes into the room, whispering loud.

"Why can't you do anything right?"

"He bit me." She looks at me like I am against her.

We are fast in the car, out of the drive way, and screeching tires in front of the house when the passenger door is yanked open. Dad is climbing in, we are moving faster and faster. The door bangs him and bangs him again. Dad is inside the car now. The door is shut. He is screaming, but we are moving too fast for him to grab the wheel.

"Stop the car, Charlene. Slow down!"

This Is Where the Cowboy Rides Away

Chris Morton was a little too big, a little too dumb, and a little too mean to ever be a great cowboy. Now, a lot of people will chuckle when they hear something like that said about someone, but that's because most people can't see their own damn faults. There wasn't anything wrong with Chris that wasn't wrong with lots of folks. He was just too big to ever set comfortable in the saddle. It threw off his timing when he tried to rope a calf. His horses worked harder to carry his large body, so they tired faster than the others. That led them to fall and trip more. Chris just didn't have a lot of the cowboying skills, and it embarrassed him, and that made him a little mean. It made him curse and swear a little louder than the other hands. It made him drink a little more. It also made him work harder. There were a lot of things that you could call Chris Morton, but decent folk just called him a hard worker.

Now, there's nothing worse than when a man ain't exactly right for his chosen profession. That's a sad affair, and it ends bad. Chris Morton wasn't ever much of a cowboy. It was his dream, sure, but the poor son-of-a-bitch just didn't have it in him. Of course, if you grow up in a small town in the Texas panhandle, you only got two dreams to choose from: be a cowboy or leave. Chris wanted to stay. He wanted to be a cowboy. Can't blame him, a lot of people stay thinking they'll be cowboys. But most of them realize fast enough that it's too hard, and there ain't no money in it. They quit and leave town, start farming, or go to work at the copper refinery down the road. Chris was just too hard-headed to see that he wasn't suited for cow-punching.

Plus, Chris was mean to the animals. If you hate the things you work with everyday, you ain't ever going to be happy. Chris cursed his horses too much, and he abused the cattle more. He didn't have the love for it that you see in other cowboys. But maybe that horse had it coming. Chris knocked it out with a five-gallon bucket half-filled with oats. This horse was ornery, and it liked to charge at Chris while he scattered feed in the trough. A lot of people will tell you that it was Chris's own damn fault for not training the horse right to begin with, and that might be true. Anyways, Chris saw that horse running straight at him, and he just took a great big circle swing with that green oat bucket and caught the sorrel mare right between the eyes. You might not think a bucket of oats could knock a horse out, but that bucket was heavy. If you get a great big man swinging it, you can knock out just about anything—especially when it's running at you. That horse just dropped to the ground looking surprised. It tried to get up and then decided to think about it some more.

Chris was just maybe too big to be a cowboy.

Sometimes, he'd get drunk and do something stupid like punch a highway patrolman or drive his truck up on the courthouse lawn and pass out. But things like that only happened once in a blue moon. He only got into fights with people that most of the town didn't like anyhow. So people were a little surprised when he went and shot that Hollywood movie star.

***

Now you might be asking yourself how a cowboy even gets close enough to a movie star to be able to shoot one, and that would be a good question. But you're just going to have to wait, because there are some things about Mr. Pepper Levon that you ought to know beforehand.

Pepper Levon hoped to be Hollywood's next superstar. He'd already been on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. He'd won a few awards from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. He'd recently signed on to star in a remake of an old Paul Newman western. Now, Mr. Levon did a lot of drugs, and that's a fact. He also drank too much, but a lot of people do that. No, Mr. Levon was having his real trouble with women. He didn't have trouble getting women. There were just too many women around. It was a kid in a candy store type of thing. And Los Angeles is the biggest candy store of them all.

No matter how many women he had relations with, it wasn't ever enough. No matter how beautiful, how willing, and how open in the biblical sense, whatever he had just tasted couldn't be as good as what he hadn't. This cooked in his brain and itched him. Even if he couldn't physically perform the act, he still wanted the option to do it. It meant less and less to him, and he wanted it more and more. See, that's a tough nut. When you're high on cocaine with blood running out of your nose and you're screaming, blinking, and itching, and you're Pink-Floyding television sets out the window, somebody's going to tell you, 'Hey buddy, you need to slow down on that stuff.' But if a single fella gets too many women into bed with them, there ain't nobody that's going to tell them it's a wrong thing. I don't know, maybe it's different for some other fellows.

Pepper Levon went to every party he could because he was afraid he'd miss the one great party that everyone would talk about later. He had an itch that told him, wherever he was, there was always something better somewhere else. The boy couldn't stay still. I suppose he was scared. The more famous he became, the more parties he was scared to miss, and the more he had to lose when he missed them. He was headed for a burnout. It was worse with the sexual relations. There was something in it to do with power, but it was also about missing out on a great sex act, the best-ever sex, with gymnasts or nuns or some such thing.

After a while, he started dreaming about the women he'd known. It started when he began wondering where they went after they left the hotel room. Their fathers and pets would show up in his dreams. These dads and animals would stand around the bed while he was having bizarre sex with women dressed in period costumes. The fathers of the other girls, along with their dogs, cats and other pets, would watch him have sex. And just when he was about to sow some vicious reaping, they would descend on him. The fathers, the dogs, the cats, the rabbits, the weasels, a turtle and a couple of canaries would start to rip him apart, and then he would wake up. He wasn't enjoying sex anymore, but he couldn't stop. The fear that he would never get a chance to do it again kept him hungry, desperate, and fucking like a dog in heat. Around a month before he left for Texas, Pepper Levon began telling complete strangers about his addiction and his dreams. It was a cry for help. Of course, it eventually got him shot.

***

Someone like an accountant can be all wrong for his profession and only end up losing other people's money, getting an ulcer, or going to prison. But if you ain't suited to be a cowboy, you're going to end up hurting yourself. Chris Morton had his third hip replacement at the age of forty-one. He wasn't uncoordinated. He was working too hard to make up for his lack of skill. When you try to overcompensate like that, you end up hurt. It's the same for any athletic profession.

By the time he turned forty-one, Chris had replaced two hips on the left leg and a knee and another hip on the right one. He walked like a tiny boat caught on a giant wave. His shoulder would rise up slow and treacherous-high, dragging a lame leg with it, and then it would hitch and crash down as he swung the other lame leg around for the next broken step. The old men sitting on the bench at the town square cursed when Chris limped past them toward his new job.

"There goes that Chris Morton."

"He's old Jack Morton's boy?"

"Yep."

"He was a hard worker."

"Yep."

"Damn shame."

"Goddamned shame." One of the old men would spit a sunflower seed onto the grass, emphasis.

"Never was a smart one."

"Nope."

The old men would shake their heads in compassion and condescension, grab an aching elbow or a knee, look around a little questioningly, and then stare at the summer grass for a while. And it *was* a goddamned shame. Chris crippled himself working too hard to make up for the fact that he didn't have the skill, grace or talent to be a cowboy. He was a pretty good shot with a rifle, but there wasn't much call for that nowadays. He blew out a knee when a horse skittered and smashed it into the metal bars of the holding pen. His first hip went trying to wrestle a sick yearling down to the ground after he missed three loops on it. He gave up, jumped off his horse, and just tried to tackle the damn calf. He never let that one heal. He went back to work as soon as he could sit horseback. It might have been shame or money or even a kind of hunger, but he couldn't wait to get back to work. He was afraid they would forget him. All he had was his hard work, and if he wasn't doing that he might as well not be a cowboy.

The second hip replacement came after he got drunk at the XIT rodeo and slipped in some spilled beer in the stadium's metal stands. He landed on the sore hip. He ignored the pain for a week, until a horse fell with him. It rolled right over with him in the saddle. It tore out his hip, circle-fractured a leg and crushed some ribs. Chris wasn't much good for walking after that. Most people who don't know would say that it was just a bad accident. They would say that it didn't mean Chris was a bad cowboy. Well, no. But it did mean that Chris wasn't a great cowboy either. Greatness makes it look easy, graceful-like and intelligent. Chris couldn't do that. He was just a hard worker.

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Pepper could see himself turning depraved, and he couldn't do anything about it. He thought playing the Paul Newman character in the remake of *Hud* would be the turning point. He would no longer be the up-and-coming Pepper Levon consumed by insecurity and a fear of vanishing unnoticed. He would be the great Pepper Levon, heir to Paul Newman's smoldering sexuality and salad dressing—king of Hollywood. Pepper figured four weeks away from L.A. on location in the Texas panhandle with nobody around to poke would be good for him. He could focus on his craft. He would go cold turkey.

That being said, as the plane angled for Texas he still found himself wondering about the L.A. parties and the L.A. tail he was going to miss. Though he knew that airplane sex was only great the first time (and then only because it was the first time), though he knew that after the new wore off you were left with sticky shorts, cut knees and muscle cramps for the rest of a three-hour ride, though he knew all of this, he could not stop scanning the aisles for possibilities. In the end, Pepper stood strong and bedded no one on the three hour plane ride. He walked into the Texas heat with a hard-on borne of abstinence and a glimmer of hope about the future.

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Nobody of any conscience would hire Chris Morton after the third hip replacement surgery. They couldn't stand the thought of him ending up in a wheelchair. Mostly, they were scared he'd find a way to sue them for disability, but that wasn't fair to Chris. He knew he was the only one to blame for his crippled legs. He just wanted to work and ride and rope (try to rope) with the rest of the ranch hands. He wanted to bullshit until midnight, drinking beer and leaning on the back of a horse trailer. He had been off the ranch for only a month, and he already missed the smell of burning hair and flesh during branding time. He missed cursing and swearing and gigging his horse hard after a calf that jumped away from the herd. He missed dragging it back, choking, with a rope around its neck.

The good citizens of Claude would not leave Chris to starve. An owner of one of the larger ranches also happened to own the town newspaper, *The Claude Communicator*. The fellow gave Chris Morton the title Entertainment Reporter. That's not usually a busy job in the Texas panhandle, but it was damn sure important then, because the next month Hollywood was coming to Claude to remake *Hud*. Nobody seemed to think of that when they gave Chris the job. They just figured he'd drink the day away in his office and stumble home quietly at night. They didn't give much thought to how much Chris was gonna miss cowboying, didn't know how ornery it would make him.

The Communicator gave Chris an office with a computer that he never turned on. Oh, he tried to turn the damn thing on lots of times, but his thick fingers were too heavy for the monitor's power button. One press of any button by Chris Morton's strong, thick finger was at least twice that of a normal man. His big dumb fingers managed only to turn the screen on and off real fast. The light at the bottom of the monitor would blink green for half a second and then turn cold and black. This left Chris feeling mean and slow. Chris tried to turn the computer on at least three times on the first day of his new job, then he gave up and left the damn thing alone. He spent the days until Pepper Levon arrived drunk and staring at a blank computer screen.

Nobody expected Chris to actually write anything for the paper. Some people weren't convinced that he could write. Chris did try to write a paragraph or two here and there. Mostly they were funny stories that happened to him on the ranch, and mostly they were unfit to print. The same words and phrases appeared over and over in those little paragraphs: *shit, fuck, heifer, fucker, turd, bum hip, bad leg, fucking ankle, fucking horse* and *fucking cow.*

Now, Chris was a big *Hud* fan, and he was very interested in seeing who would play Paul Newman's character in the remake. He was so interested that his only other official action as the *Claude Communicator* entertainment reporter was to book an interview with Pepper Levon. This wasn't as organized as it sounds. Chris ran into a member of the pre-publicity crew in the Might-T Burger & Taco Stand parking lot. This crew member was trying to buy beer in a dry county. Just when he had decided to suck it up and drive the thirty miles into Amarillo to buy beer, Chris stepped out of his truck with a bottle of whiskey in his hand. Well, after a few pulls in the dirt alley behind the Might-T Burger, Chris traded half a bottle of whiskey for an interview with the mysterious and soon to be uncomfortably celibate Pepper Levon.

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Well, the day finally arrived. Chris Morton showed up on the set in front of the Claude courthouse drunk and mean, and Pepper Levon showed up tired and horny. Wars have been started under better circumstances. They each took a chair under a blue awning that had been set up for the media. Seeing as how the interview was booked to begin with, there wasn't many people about. The thirsty crew member who had booked the interview pulled a few strings, and Pepper was simply yanked from a photo shoot thirty minutes earlier than he would have been and led to Chris.

There was a life-sized cut-out of Pepper next to one of Paul Newman in *Hud*. It made Chris angry.

"You don't look like Paul Newman." Chris took a pull from the fifth of whiskey that he brought to the interview and offered Pepper a swallow.

"No, I don't. Do you think I should?" Pepper was a little thrown off by the giant man in the sweat-stained cowboy hat, but he took the whiskey. Pepper figured if the reporter was going to need alcohol to get through the interview, then he would probably need it too. He also hoped a slight buzz would take the edge off his libido. He had just completed a photo-op at the Might-T Burger. And Suzie Quilton, a precocious little flirt with a strong desire to leave Claude under the arm of a big city man, had been a little too friendly in tight jeans and her white Might-T Burger T-shirt.

"Now, I don't know nothing about Hollywood, but it seems to me, if you're gonna remake a movie that people like, you best keep it familiar." Chris leaned toward Pepper and stared at him under the brim of his dirty cowboy hat. "And you don't look too familiar." Pepper wasn't sure if Chris was drunk or crazy.

"Well—"

"Do you know Paul Newman?"

"No, I don't." Pepper's was trying very hard to focus on the drunken giant in front of him. He could feel Chris's slow-growing hate, but part of him was in the burger joint, watching Suzie Quilton swing her sweet little ass as she shook the grease out of a basket of tater-tots. Truth be told, Suzie wasn't all that attractive in the face. But she did have that country-girl body and tan, and she just looked like she wanted to do something nasty. She broadcast it. There's nothing sexier in a small town than a teenage girl who wants to be someplace else. Most men can't resist that naive hunger.

"And you think you're going to be able to do a good job with it?" Chris leaned back and took another pull from the fifth. He didn't offer Pepper any this time. He just let the bottle dangle between his thumb and index finger.

"I hope to. I've always admired Paul Newman's work. I only hope I can live up to the first movie's standards." Pepper Levon was on auto-pilot. He had already given enough interviews about remaking *Hud* to talk through them without thinking. "In the end, all you can do is try your best and hope the audience sees your hard work and appreciates it."

"Exactly how hard do Hollywood men, like yourself, work?" Chris asked in a tone that said he already had an answer to the question.

Pepper, however, was still remembering back to his morning with Suzie at the Might-T Burger. She had been wiping the crumbs off his table for a third time, creating a small tornado of perfume and bleach, floating perfect breasts inches from his face. She asked random questions. Did he know Jennifer Aniston? What happened during love scenes? Did he take off all of his clothes, or did he wear underwear?

"On a regular shoot we usually work about fourteen hours a day. It just depends on what the scene needs. Love scenes take a very long time," Pepper replied.

"You call fucking hard work?" Well, there are questions, and then there are Questions. And the only thing that seems to make an easy question a hard Question, or a good question a bad Question is, itself, a question of timing. Chris Morton knew a fight was coming as soon Pepper looked at him.

"Do you know how hard I work, buddy? Do you have any idea what it takes to be an actor? Do you have any idea how many women I've been with?" Pepper wasn't exactly sure where his last question came from, but he could almost see Suzie's face above the number that followed it.

Now, a sober man might be thrown off by someone saying something like that, but Chris Morton was drunk and interested. He leaned back in his chair, pushed the brim of his hat up with one thick finger, gave Pepper a cool stare, and asked, "How many?"

"I don't know, like four hundred and thirty. Gimme another drink, will you?" Pepper couldn't believe that this conversation was happening.

"A lot of people lie about how many girls they been with. You wouldn't happen to be one of them fellers, would ya?"

"After I won the Golden Globe, I had a line of fifty women standing outside my hotel room. There were too many. I couldn't get to them all. I had my agent go out and look at their toes. Any girl with nasty toes got the bounce."

"You got a thing for toes?" Chris Morton's suspicions about Hollywood folks were being confirmed.

"No. There were too many. I couldn't get to them all. Christ, I wanted to. We had to get rid of some, so I told my agent to get rid of the ones with nasty toes.

You know, stubby big toes, little pinkie toes without nails, hair—creepy stuff like that. I'm with the first girl, and I'm thinking of those poor women with funky toes walking home alone and broken-hearted. They didn't do anything wrong. They just wanted to be with a star, and I refused them. I refused them all." It wasn't the holiest of confessions, but it eased something in Pepper. He felt better, but he also felt a little vulnerable.

"Boy, I thought *I* was fucked up. You're one sick son-of-a-bitch." Chris laughed. He didn't mean nothing by it. He was actually starting to like this Pepper Levon fellow. And that was exactly why Chris was confused and angered by what followed.

"Oh, just shut-up, you stupid fucking hick. I'm fucking drowning here, and you, you giant fucking asshole, give me shit about Newman and toes!"

Well, obviously, Pepper's last comments didn't go over too good with Chris Morton, and Pepper Levon was already past his breaking point. The interview was over, and the only thing left was the fighting words.

"What'd you call me, mister?" Chris asked.

"Christ, what is it with you hicks?" Pepper jumped out of his chair and walked into the life-sized Paul Newman cut-out at his side. Pepper was angry at being attacked, and he felt weak because he couldn't stop thinking about Suzie. Of course, feeling weak makes a man want to hurt someone or something. So, once Pepper finished kicking poor old Paul Newman's ass, he made to punch Chris Morton in his eye. Pepper might have been angry and confused, but he was not stupid.

Pepper Levon took one look at Chris Morton's giant shoulders and cold eyes, and he turned around and headed for his trailer.

Pepper was in such a hurry to get to his trailer and masturbate—an effective stress reliever—that he didn't see Suzie Quilton bringing lunch to the crew. Just like he'd run into Paul Newman, he ran right into Suzie, knocking her and her tray of tater-tots onto the green summer courtyard grass in a hot breeze of shampooed hair, perfume, fried-food and fresh-cut grass.

Pepper apologized. He apologized to her for knocking her down. He told her he had wanted to see her naked from the moment he saw her and that he was sorry for that. He told her that he was going to take her back to his trailer and fuck her silly and that he was sorry for that too. He said all of this in a rush, and he didn't really think out what he was saying. It was true that Suzie had been around the block since she was thirteen, and it was true that she had planned on bedding Pepper the minute she heard he was coming to town. But she was also damn sure that she was nobody's whore. And just as Suzie was about to tell Pepper as such, and knee him in the nuts to boot—

Oh hell, I've left Chris Morton sitting in his chair. We're going to have to go back a bit. After Pepper stomped out of the interview like his hair was on fire and his ass was catching, Chris Morton was left with a dilemma. He knew his duty. He had to kick Pepper Levon's ass. It was the cowboy code he'd lived by all his life. He couldn't ride, couldn't rope, didn't even work on a ranch anymore. If he let Pepper Levon threaten him like that without an ass-kicking, then there was nothing left. Chris hitched his crippled body out of the chair and stumbled a little. He looked around, drunk and searching. He couldn't chase Pepper, couldn't kick his ass even if he caught him. Chris was too crippled to fight. He swung slow on his hip and limped toward his truck to get a little help.

So, little Suzie Quilton was explaining to Pepper in a loud voice that she was not the town whore, and that she wouldn't touch his dick with a condom on the end of a ten-foot stick. And to drive the point home, she kneed Pepper Levon in the testicles with all the strength in her tight, young thigh. It just so happens that this was the very thigh, one of a pair, that Pepper had planned to fantasize about having wrapped around his head while masturbating in his trailer. And the exact moment that Suzie said she wouldn't touch his pecker with a rubber on a ten-foot stick and kneed Pepper in the testicles was also the exact moment that Chris Morton went and shot Pepper Levon in the ass with a .22 rifle.

I don't mean to frighten you folks. A .22 rifle is a little ol' gun that ain't going to hurt nobody, especially if you shoot them in the ass. Pepper spent one night at the emergency room down in Amarillo and was back on the set the next day, limping but abstinent and thankful. He wasn't sure if it was being shot, or being kneed in the nuts, or the ass-chewing that Suzie continued to administer as the paramedics wheeled him to the ambulance. But Pepper felt a corner had been turned. Personally, I like to believe that it was a combination of all three.

As for Chris Morton, some say that he drives around shooting movie stars in the ass whenever they forget the little people, but that's not true. If Pepper kind of ran headlong and oblivious into his salvation, Chris Morton limped calmly toward his. He had planned to kill Pepper Levon when he climbed out of that interview chair, but as he slowly limped to his truck, he felt silly and useless. He was going to kill a man he couldn't fight, and that felt wrong to him. He was a lot of things, but he was not weak. Chris decided to shoot Pepper in the ass to save face. He thought of it as a truce. And he also thought of it as his last act as a cowboy. I think he knew all along that he was going to have to quit. I think he was just waiting for what you'd call a graceful exit. Of course, there wasn't too much graceful about Chris to begin with.

Into Red Earth

The lurching motion of a slow train leaving, I am almost home. A round man watches me. He plans either to rob me or to speak to me. I would rather he rob me. I am in India, leaving Kolkata for the village of my birth, Jamtara. I am here and we are moving. I have made this trip many times in the past three months, and many more times thirty years before this. The bars across the windows stop trash from going out or thieves from reaching in. The layers of paint on the old metal bars chip and crack, exposing more chips and cracks underneath. They mark time. There, on a bottom bar, is the dark green of my youth. Howrah Station, Kolkata and the Hooghly River are staying and I am going, home.

Between bars in the window I see a stray dog on the side street cause a bus to swerve and teeter. Already a mob is forming. The train is lurching. I am not sure if they will kill the driver or the dog. It is hot. The time I have been gone may be too long. I know West Bengal no longer. These people are defeated. They are many, and they are defeated.

I am here. My wife is in Jamtara. I have two grown children in Canada. They cannot be Indian. They do not belong here. I am not Canadian. I do belong here, and I am here.

"*The Times of India* is the best newspaper!" The round man is staring at me. He sits on the sticky vinyl seat facing mine. His knees are inches from my own. I force a smile for him and look down at the paper in my lap.

"Yes," I say.

"You are not from here. I can tell from your shoes. You have come from America!" He is sweating too much. He is fat.

"Canada, man." I do not realize until I speak that we are using English.

"Shoes." He is too familiar with me.

"Yes, shoes." I nod, though I do not know what he means. I look down at the paper.

The train from Kolkata to Jamtara is overcrowded and slow. The lepers, transvestites, bottled-water sellers and homeless children all beg for rupees. A dirty little girl poked me on the arm twenty-seven times at the station, waiting for my rupees. I did not look at her face. I have not seen her face in thirty years, and I did not pay her.

"They are the best shoes!" He has yelled this so that I will look at him. Now everyone is looking at my shoes. A suspicious woman sitting on the bench diagonally across the aisle holds her daughter protectively. The woman has a suspicious friend. They sit like feral dogs and watch me.

"They are shoes."

"They are American shoes! How much have you paid for these fine shoes?" He has opened his chubby palm toward my shoes like a hostess on a game show.

Defeated men with voices hoarse and paralyzed from saying the same thing over and over weave between me, the fat man in slacks and a sweat-stained dress shirt, and the suspicious women. The bottled-water seller is coming. "Boddly wattle, Boddly wattle." It is vendor English in a voice broken from years of selling and saying the same thing. It is a nightmare sound. My daughter, Jinga, remembers it as a funny voice. She was eight and eighteen the only two times she returned here. Returned? She cannot return to a place she has never been. She sat barefoot and smiled on the porch of my father's house. She tried but could not hide what she was.

I was proud then, but pride in children just drifts away after a certain age. They become adults you must communicate with, and that is impossible. She smiles in black and white photographs, sitting, legs crossed, on the cement porch eating rice and *daal* off a round metal plate. She is eight and looks the same as the other girls, but the plate is too big for her. She is awkward with it, and she wants to go home. Sticky hand in mouth, and she wants to go home. It is a beautiful picture.

"They are Nike! I can see the *swoosh*. That is what you Americans call it, *swoosh*." He thinks he has taught me something. His hand shoots into the air, waving around emphatically. We are the centre of attention. The suspicious women are curious. I try to tuck my shoes under the bench. My son Rudra steals my money to buy Nikes, and when they are no longer in style, more stealing and more buying. I have worn my son's discarded shoes since he was old enough to steal.

"Where do you live in America?"

"I am Canadian." He has forced me into a beer commercial. The women exchange a nasty, knowing look.

"Nike is a Canadian company?"

Jinga would point to a bottled-water seller and say, "Dad, he sounds so funny," and giggle a beautiful little-girl giggle that poked you gently in the ribs. But the bottled-water seller is dying, Jinga. And he is selling their water back to them. The ground water is poison, and Coca-Cola and Pepsi and a hundred other companies take their polluted water, clean it, bottle it, and sell it back to them for ten rupees a litre. They piss it down the train toilet. It spills onto the tracks beneath their feet. They crush the empty plastic bottles so that they will fit between the window bars. They toss them onto the grass and trash beside the tracks as the train creeps down its path. Rats drag their fat bodies across the broken and crushed plastic looking for scraps.

I have ignored the round man, and he is waiting. He has asked me something.

"Nike was founded in Oregon," I inform him. I raise the paper between us and pretend to read.

I have returned to rebuild my grandfather's house. My father's brothers and their sons are letting it melt into red earth. Ancient red bricks turn into mud during the monsoon, and more every year. I do not have an Indian son to rebuild the house that I am rebuilding. In twenty years, it will begin to melt, and Rudra will not be able to save it. He is not Indian. My daughter's husband will not rebuild it. He is American. He does not know India. I laugh at his jokes, but I do not understand them. Sons of sons rent out my grandfather's ancient rooms for rupees. They sit, doing nothing, and collect rent from the dying house. They are fat and stationary. Thirty-year-old dust covers them, and they would die if dying did not take extra work.

My grandfather's house will be a school for girls. I will live with my wife on the third floor. New desks and new bathrooms will be built for the second, and a small dormitory will be built on the first. I will give something back. There is enough time. They need help. They do not know. Of course, it will be small, but I left India knowing I would return to help.

The round man is pretending to sleep. He is watching me watch him. His fat arms rest on his fat stomach. His head is bent forward, and he secretly stares at me between the top of his fat plastic glasses and his sweaty eyebrows. His head rolls with the train. He wants to know why I have returned. He wants to know about the greed. He wants to hear that America is a vile and corrupt place. He wants to know that I am failing there. He wants to know that my son is a drug addict and that my daughter is a whore. He wants to know how many white men I have worked for. He wants to live there so badly that he would kill me for the chance.

I turn toward the window, but it is more of the same. A rickshaw driver pedals a fat woman and a tourist along the street. She is too much for him. He climbs down from the ancient bicycle seat, grabs rusting handlebars, and pushes the two of them with small, tough feet through a monsoon puddle. This work is worth more than the ten rupees the woman will drop into his hand without looking at him, but he cannot say that. We are leaving this city too slowly. We are not heading home fast enough. It is a three hundred year old city in a five thousand year old country. The British East India Company created Kolkata in 1690. Now it should be left to the rats and the communists. We can build our own city, brick by brick, school by school.

You would not know it from the street, but the sun sets beautifully over the roofs of Kolkata. My brother moved to Kolkata to practice medicine twenty years ago. He lives in a cement cell and breathes pollution. He has three locks on his front door. I have asked him to return with me to our village. He says that he has forgotten it. I stay in his little apartment when I travel to Kolkata to pay the bribes to get the paperwork to start my school. I dry my clothes on his roof.

Six stories up, you cannot see the filth below you. Six stories up, there is nothing but clotheslines and the tops of palms. There is no crushed plastic. There are no *Paan* stains in the hallways, on the sidewalks, on the corners of buildings. These people do not know how to live. They spit their nasty tobacco wherever they choose. There are red stains on the walls all over this dying city. What city? The city and the Bengalis in it were built by the British. The Bengalis were invented, wound up and left to run down with the world laughing. Look at these people. Half of Kolkata's residents are fat. The other half are starving.

I see you. Sleep, round man. You are here and you are dying.

My wife hates it in Jamtara. Canada has spoiled her. She cries for air conditioning. She refuses to cook. She demands servants. She cooked every day in Canada, dreaming every day of her servants in West Bengal. She is Indian. She sits and laughs and talks with my relatives. They do nothing. They drink my tea and eat my fruit. They leave for a nap and return later for more tea. They ask for money to send their children to private English-medium schools. They think I am rich. My wife thinks I am rich. She tells people that I am rich. They will murder us in our sleep, and she will not understand why.

She is from Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi. She thinks she is big-city. She is Canadian. She does not understand people who live off unearned rent and do nothing but nap and drink my tea. Or she may understand them perfectly. They are my relatives, and they are dangerous. She and they do not know how dangerous they are. There are hundreds of them, and already they are whispering about hidden treasure.

The fat man and I are headed toward Jamtara. I used to tell Jinga it was the center of the universe. I would smile and pick her up and ask, "Where is the center of the universe?" And she would smile a mouthful: "Jamtara." Jinga, it may as well have been Never-Never Land. I am sorry. We sweat and roll back and forth across sticky seats with the clumsiness of the ancient train. These trains are as old as Partition. They have seen us ripped apart. Now they groan under our fat asses. The tracks bend under our grotesque weight. We build monuments to Gandhiji and swim in filth. Kolkata is a monument to the British, littered with the waste of millions of loyal subjects. We can only follow. We do not lead. That is why the British ruled here so easily. We have lost our pride. We live in a city that we did not build and drink Coca-Cola.

The fat man is awake. He is working his lips to try to say something to me. They are moist and large and move very slowly. Come on, fat man, what does India have for me?

"My cousin has a three-car garage."

"What?"

"My cousin in America has a three-car garage. I have seen the picture." He is very serious. His soft hands are resting on his soft knees, and his head is bobbing at me like a chicken begging for its neck to be rung.

"How do you know that it is his?" I ask.

"It is his." He looks confused. He has stopped nodding.

We are moving toward Jamtara, and suddenly I am not confused. I am very clear. "My first year in Canada, I was so ashamed that I could not find work that I walked to the rich part of town in winter and used a borrowed camera to take pictures of a two-story house with nice cars in the driveway. I mailed those pictures home. I wrote on the backs of Polaroid pictures that we were doing fine and that we planned to return soon. I did not return for years."

"The three garages are his."

"I could not afford even bus fare. I had to walk in the snow to the rich part of town. A white woman stared at me through her kitchen window. Snow is only beautiful from one side of the window, fat man. You know? I got lost on the way home. I have begged people to let me work extra hours for less than the minimum wage. I have . . . ." But it is no use. The suspicious women are smiling. They have something to gossip about. I finish my story facing the window, watching the open sewer run along the tracks behind the villages. "My mother wired months later that my father died, but that he saw the pictures and thought my house was beautiful. He was very proud."

"Yes, but the garages are his. Wait, I will show you." The fat man is attempting to cram his hand into his shirt pocket. He produces his Polaroid. "See." It is a picture of a three-car garage. The grass is green, the bricks are new. It is a lie.

"It is a lie." I search for his eyes, but they are staring at my shoes.

"You are the liar!" He yells this. "You do not even come from America, I bet." Now he is pouting. He has rolled over on one fat thigh and turned to look out his window.

"I came from Canada." I whisper this, because it doesn't matter who hears. I also stare out the window.

I am broke. All of my savings are tied up in the school. If I do not find some charity soon, it will fail. We depend upon our undependable children to collect our pensions and forward them to us. We are vulnerable. I can no longer afford to return to Canada. We will die in India. We will die on the road, or of a curable disease, or at the hands of my relatives. My grandfather's house will remain unfinished and be again rented out.

I will be forgotten. My children will cry and forget me. Their children will never know India. They will be colored question marks in Canadian classrooms. "Where are you from?" "What race are you?" "Who are you?" "Why are you here?" I do not know why my children are in Canada. I do not know why I went to Canada, do not understand why I stayed thirty years. I do not understand why I returned too old to do anything. I am not a romantic, but I am here.

"It is not a lie, sir." The fat man has found some energy. "You are mistaken. These three garages are my cousin's. He has told me in an e-mail. I have other pictures of his wife and children. They are on the inside."

"It is a lie." My own children have cursed me in a language that I did not understand. "You do not want to go there. It is a lie." If he would just open his fat eyes. "It is a lie."

"I will not be called a liar, sir!" He has jumped from his seat and is standing over me, rocking with the train. The Styrofoam cup he was sipping *chai* from shakes in his fat hand near my head. The suspicious woman has grabbed her child with both hands. The fat man's fingers claw at my copy of *The Times of India*. His belly is shaking.

I cannot resist. "You are a big fat liar." Thank you, Jinga. My daughter taught me that when she was young. A white kid told her that Paki's worshipped cows. She said, "You are a big fat liar." She said it in perfect Canadian English. Perfect English was a tool her mother desperately needed. Her mother became fat with fear in Canada. She did not learn to drive. She did nothing but dream of India and eat. The round man is shocked. His fat fingers rest on my wrinkled paper, crunching it. His glasses are taped together at one corner. They are taped very carefully. You would not see it unless he was very near to your face. They have been taped and re-taped. I can see the dirty grey of the first tape underneath a careful mound of reinforcement.

"You should be dreaming about India. Look around fat man, you are needed here." I have said it out loud. The train is moving behind another town wall. There are vines. There is the open sewer. A man is squatting, shitting. A woman is dumping trash. The path back up to the village is steep. We used to search for mangoes in the trees that lined the road to our pond. One summer in my youth, the government cut them down to make room for power lines. He is squatting and shitting without shame. He is watching us watch him. We are eyes behind bars riding behind towns, watching filth.

"Why are you here, N.R.I?"

He has cursed me. He has called me a Non-Resident Indian. I raise my eyes to him and shake his hand off my paper. "I am here to build, man. To create. Why are you here?" The fat man settles back into his chair and leans toward me. One giant hand palms his knee.

"Because you are rich, you will solve our problems? I have seen your type. You are covered in *swooshes* and clutch your briefcase to your chest. You wipe the seat before you sit. You will run out of money and go home. You cannot stay."

The fat man takes the Styrofoam cup he is holding with his fat fingers and tosses the remnants at my shoes. The brown water mixes with the rest of the dirt and scum on the train floor. Only a few drops land on my shoes.

"I am shoe rich, man. I have many boxes of shoes at home. You have not hurt me." I pull the paper in front of my face with shaking hands.

"You are mad," he scoffs.

I wait behind my paper until the train pulls into the station. He cannot fight me. There is too little in this country to win. I will rebuild my father's home brick by brick until the money is gone. My wife will wish me good night, and a relative will slip under my mosquito net and end me in the middle of a dream.

Written With Worms

"I think Gwen must have passed away." He was peering through the curtain they had purchased at Goodwill. New cars were unloading men, women and children dressed in black clothing. He had spoken in a softer voice than normal. His wife did not hear him.

Just two days ago, Gwen had given his wife a recipe for jam. He and his wife had been standing on Bob and Gwen's porch. Gwen was too ill to step outside. Her hand shook gently as she passed the recipe written on a dog-eared index card through a long tear in the screen door. The index card was as yellowed and stained as the apron she always wore. He wondered if she owned dozens of identical aprons or just one, perhaps lucky, apron. He wondered if she wore it because she was afraid of dying.

He didn't know the name of her disease. Yet standing there, knowing that he and his wife were among the first young couples to move into the fifty-year-old neighbourhood, knowing that there would be many more newlyweds and college kids moving in for the cheap rent and character homes, he guessed that whatever she was dying of would fit neatly enough under the term *old age*.

His wife was making plum jam, but he didn't understand why. He knew the plums from the tree in the backyard would rot if they weren't used soon, but he felt busy enough repairing the character in their character home and working at their new business. It wasn't really a new business. It was her father's business, but her father was out of the country and it felt new.

They didn't even have the equipment to make jam. He had burned his hands on the sterilized lids. He had also burned his forehead on the pot of boiling water when he bent over the stove to get a pan from inside the oven, but that was due largely to his own clumsiness. He wasn't in the mood to think about it. They had not had any time in the two months since arriving in Edmonton to just do nothing. He didn't understand why his wife would take this little window of opportunity for doing nothing to make jam. He was a little annoyed that not only had she decided to waste her free time by making jam, but that she was also constantly requiring his hands, his free time, in the making of this jam.

She was using his hands that could be doing nothing. His hands could be holding the remote control. His hands could be smoking a cigarette. His hands could be doing what he wanted his hands to do: nothing.

His burnt fingertips scratched across the cheap curtain. He continued to look out the window. There hadn't been any autumn. A cool summer had turned into winter overnight. A thin layer of ice stuck surprised leaves to frozen trees. A hose winding its way to a lonely lilac bush in the front yard looked like an earthworm caught in the Texas heat. It looked like it had died a horrible death. But more than that, it looked like it didn't belong there. He had used the hose three days before. Summer had stayed out too late and gotten itself turned into a pumpkin, he thought, a frozen pumpkin. It hadn't snowed yet, but the frost was so thick it might as well be snow. They would call it snow in Austin. He watched the last of the mourners walk up the crumbling steps to Gwen's house.

"I think Gwen passed away." This time he said it loud enough for her to hear.

"No she didn't."

He knew why she didn't believe him. He often had horrible imaginations that gave rise to dire predictions that very rarely came about. He was, after all, only watching well-dressed people enter a house that just happened to contain a sick old woman. Sick yes, but well enough to stand. And not everyone was wearing black. There was a fat kid wearing some obnoxious neon yellow that seemed just that much more obnoxious given the possible wake he was attending.

He knew he could be wrong, and somewhere inside him he was sure of it, but he was still angry that she didn't believe him. He believed it when he said it. He wasn't lying. It had to be true. It didn't have to be true so that he could be justified in his anger at her for not believing him. It had to be true so that he could be right and she could see that he was right, at least some of the time. Then, then, she might love him more. No, it wasn't love, and it wasn't exactly respect, that he was after from her. It was that emotion that hovered between the clichés of love and respect. It was . . . . He didn't have the word for it, but he knew what it felt like.

"I love you," he said.

She wasn't buying it. He could hear her spoon continue to scrape along the bottom of a pot.

He watched the pudgy kid clad in neon run back to the car and retrieve a bag. The point was that he had said that he thought Gwen was dead. He was pretty sure that Gwen wasn't dead. Nobody lets their fat child go to a dead person's house dressed like a clown. But he had said it. And he believed it when he said it. And that meant that his wife should at least. . . . Well, he wasn't really sure what she should do, but he was certain that she shouldn't attack his observational skills or dismiss his compassionate concern about their dear, sweet, on-the-verge-of-death neighbour. How dare she deny his compassion, however contrived it might be.

He turned from the window. "I believe that Gwen is dead." He said it with authority, waving his burnt index finger in the air.

"I hope not. Bob would be lonely. Could you tighten this lid for me?"

She held a Mason jar filled with plum jam in front of his red index finger. She held it in two hands, two tiny hands. The giant diamond that he had given her two months ago twinkled in the kitchen light, shooting lightning into the purple jar she held between them. He wasn't entirely convinced that it was a real diamond. He believed that the jeweller in the mall had screwed them. He looked at her warily over the top of the jar.

"The garden hose looks like a dead Texas earthworm," he said.

"They have earthworms that big in Texas?"

"Dead, a dead earthworm. It looks like an earthworm that crawled out after a rain and died and got baked by the sun on the sidewalk."

"It's too cold to bake an earthworm here."

"It *looks* like a baked earthworm. I didn't say it was a baked earthworm. It *looks* like a baked earthworm." He had started off patiently explaining, but by the time he finished the sentence his voice was raised.

"You'd better drag it to the garage, or it will crack," she said.

"What?"

"Put away the hose or the water in it will freeze and burst it."

"You don't think Gwen is dead?"

"No," she said. "Could you get me some jar labels from the front bedroom? They're in the first drawer on the left."

He went in search of the labels.

He hated the front bedroom. It was clutter, all clutter. The unpacked boxes from the move were stacked on top of the boxes they hadn't unpacked. Towels, pens, paperclips, keyboards, clothes, dishes and picture frames covered every horizontal surface. He had to turn sideways just to enter.

"Which drawer are they in?" he yelled.

"First on the left."

"Which desk? There are two desks in here."

"The brown one."

"They're both fucking brown," he muttered under his breath and started to move the boxes from in front of the first desk. The labels weren't there. He cursed a little more loudly.

"What?" she called from the kitchen.

"Nothing," he yelled back. He weaved his way to the second desk, picking up and moving what seemed like every box in the room. He stumbled over books, posters and toys. He didn't know where all the stuff had come from. He had brought only a few boxes with him from Texas, and he didn't remember her owning that many things. He paused at a box filled with coffee mugs that had her father's company logo on them. He couldn't figure out how they got here. They were supposed to be at the office. Was somebody secretly moving stuff into his home? He found a box full of test tubes. They were left over from when his father-in-law had been a chemist at the University. They didn't belong here either. He started looking for his own university diploma but quickly gave up. There were too many boxes. He inched and squeezed his way to the second desk.

"They weren't in the second drawer. They were in the first drawer," he yelled when he found them.

"That's what I told you, the first drawer." Her voice had a joyous quality to it that drove him mad. He found her in the kitchen and handed her the labels. "Oh, not these," she said. "The ones that say *From the Kitchen of*: on them." She turned back to the stove.

He stomped to the bedroom, overturned a box of Christmas labels as he grabbed the correct labels, and returned to the kitchen. He tapped her on the shoulder. "These?"

"Do they say *From the Kitchen of*: on them?" She was working at the stove and didn't turn around.

"Yes."

"Then they're the right ones."

He fled to the front hall and grabbed his leather coat. It wasn't really his leather coat. It was his father-in-law's. He himself didn't have a good winter coat. The leather coat was one of many that his father-in-law had ordered for the family business. They were black with *Happy Imports* written in yellow on the right breast pocket. It was a nice coat. It fit well when he first tried it on in his father-in-law's house, but now it seemed too small. He zipped it up and grabbed the fleece gloves that his wife had bought for him from the giant Walmart. He opened the front door and stepped out into the chill. He turned his head, holding the door open with one gloved hand, and said loud enough for her to hear, "We should clean the front bedroom when you get a chance." He let the wind slam the door behind him.

He could feel his burned fingertips itching across the seams inside his gloves. His nose felt cold. He stomped his feet a little, crossed his arms, and rubbed his shoulders. He was trying to find the energy to walk the four steps down the front porch to get to the hose. He knew he was going to have to take his gloves off to unscrew the damn thing from the tap. He imagined how bad the cold metal would burn his raw fingertips. His nose started to drip.

He had to walk across the flowerbed to get to the tap. He stomped through the marigolds underneath the living room window. He enjoyed hearing the frozen stems crunch under his boots. He told himself that he shouldn't be enjoying this. The hose kept slipping through his new fleece gloves. He took them off and put them in his pocket. He thought he saw a snowflake drift by. The hose was frozen to the tap, he couldn't budge it. He couldn't believe that she hadn't told him to do this earlier. He was from Texas, what did he know about frozen hoses? He didn't know anything about frozen hoses, jam, plums, death or marriage. He didn't know why the mail didn't come on Saturdays in Canada the way it did in Texas. He didn't know how cold four below zero Celsius was. He didn't know—

The hose finally broke free. He dropped it on the ground and reached for the gloves in his pocket. They had fallen out during the struggle. He had unknowingly stomped them into the ground. They were covered in dirt and frost. He shook them out, dropped them, picked them up, and shook them out again. His nose dripped. He grabbed the end of the hose and turned around to start rolling it up.

It did look like a dead earthworm. The purple-brown of healthy earthworms matched the dirt they lived in so well that you knew they belonged there. When the rain forced them out to die on the sidewalk they turned the color of things preserved in formaldehyde. They looked too pale against the clean, wet-grey of a newly rained-on sidewalk. The hose was useless in winter. Just a few days before, it was doing what it was meant to do. But the frost had come, and now it was frozen and pointless in a cold yard.

The hose was too stiff to roll up. He forced two coils and then it split. A tear about an inch long revealed the black rubber inside.

"She's not going to like that," he said to the hose. He dropped it and reached into his pocket for a smoke. He couldn't get hold of a cigarette with his gloves on. He took them off. His nose dripped. He lit the cigarette and put his gloves back on.

He dragged the hose around to the back and threw it in the garage with the empty boxes that wouldn't fit into the front bedroom. He went back inside and slammed the door.

"What's wrong?" she asked. She was standing in the hallway drying her hands with one of the hand towels they had gotten as a wedding gift. Everybody had bought them the towels from their wedding registry. Nobody bought them the DVD player.

"Nothing's wrong. I couldn't roll the damn hose. It was too stiff. I drug it to the garage."

"You shouldn't try to roll it. You could break it," she said.

"That's why I didn't," he said. His back had been turned to her while he was getting out of his boots, jacket and gloves. Now he turned to face her. "Why didn't you tell me to put the hose up before it got cold?"

"You want to taste the jam?"

"No."

"You had another cigarette, didn't you? When are you going to quit?" She went to the kitchen and returned with some jam on a cracker.

"Have you ever seen a live earthworm, a long one?" he asked.

"No, just little ones."

"After it rains, I don't know if it's the rain or what, but after it rains they come out, along with the frogs, and then they die and bake in the sun on the sidewalks."

"Yeah, you told me. It sounds disgusting."

"It's not disgusting."

"When are you going to quit?" Her tiny hands put the cracker up to his lips.

He dodged it. "When I was little, I thought those baked earthworms were God's way of writing a letter. I thought if you could get high enough to see all of them on the sidewalk at the same time they would spell out a message."

"Did they?"

"I never got high enough."

"Maybe they would have told you that Gwen was dead."

"She's not dead."

"I know."

"I split the hose when I tried to roll it up."

"Yeah, I saw you through the window," she said. "Men are so stupid." She walked back into the kitchen. He thought he saw her do a little skip. He followed her.

"Did you just skip into the kitchen?"

"Yes." She was smiling at him.

"She could be dead," he said.

"She could be alive."

"Yeah, I guess there is always that. She could be alive. I mean, I hope she's alive. It's just that I was worried that she was dead, or I was worried for a second there that she was dead, but you didn't believe me. Then that fat kid danced across the lawn. How cold is it going to get this winter? I guess she's probably not dead. My fingertips hurt. We have to buy tongs if we're going to be making a lot of jam."

"Why would we be making a lot of jam?"

"We're doing it now, aren't we?"

"I've got tongs. I'd just rather do this with you. I like watching you use your hands. They're so big."

"Can I have some of that jam now?" he asked.

"No." She smiled and quickly stuffed the cracker he had refused into her mouth.

He sat down at the white plastic patio table they were using as a kitchen table. "I wanted the earthworms to give me a clue, like in a treasure map or something. I wanted them to start me on an adventure."

"Maybe they spelled out Canada," she said through a mouthful of cracker. She returned to the stove, her back to him.

He laughed. "Yeah, maybe. Or maybe they were spelling out your name."

"Is it romantic to have your name spelled out by dead earthworms on a sidewalk?" she asked. He knew she was smiling. She held her shoulders a certain way when she smiled.

"Not everywhere, but it's a big deal in Texas. It's like your first kiss on your first date. Dead earthworms writing out your name on a hot sidewalk. Many a girl dreams of that." He had gotten up and walked to the stove. He wrapped his arms around her waist and dropped his chin on her shoulder. She leaned back into him. "Can I have some of that jam now?" he asked.

"You had your first kiss on your first date?"

"Can I have some of that jam now?"

"Nope, it needs to set for a day. Besides, I'm giving it to Bob and Gwen for their anniversary. Hurry up and get ready or we'll be late." She leaned her head back to kiss him on the cheek.

"You have tongs?" he said.

Sunday Morning Handover

The Canadian River Cafe's a low wood building backed off the highway a piece where the four-lane bridge crosses the Canadian River. The river don't go all the way up to Canada, it's just a name. Somebody just must have thought it did. The Cafe has a nice big parking lot and a reputation for the biggest hamburgers in Texas. Some reporter sometime called them hubcap-sized. It ain't true, they just use big buns. The place changes hands about every two years, but the menu and busboy stays the same. Owners get tired of driving out from the city every day, I suppose. Since it makes a good profit, that's the only reason I can guess why it'd sell so often. But I don't know nothing. I just clean the toilets.

I've been cleaning this fucking cafe every Sunday for six years. It's mostly an easy job, that's why I've been doing it so long. It damn sure ain't for the pay. I just got comfortable and stuck with it. There's a little room in the back, they let me stay in it for free. I bus the tables on the weekdays and clean the old place up on Sundays. It's room and board plus three dollars an hour, and I get some of the tips from the waitress. Though, this new one's been shortin' me, the dried-up old bitch. But I *yes ma'am* her all the same. It ain't worth starting something over.

The highway connects Amarillo with Dumas, a little town forty miles north. There ain't nothing between them but the Cafe and the river. Most folks think we get our business from the motorcycle crowd. They come down to the sand dunes of a weekend to get muddy and drunk in what's left of the river flowing through the state park. The river's been dammed up to hell and gone away back in New Mexico someplace. It's just a trickle of red sludge nowadays. The river rats—that's what I call the motorcycle boys—only use the bathrooms and the Coke machine. Our paying customers are the old folks that drive from Amarillo and Dumas to pretend that it's 1955 and that they're eighteen-fucking-years-old. One owner tried to get rid of the drugstore counter, the yellow vinyl booths and the black and white checkered floor, but the old folks bitched and whined until he dropped the idea. One thing I know, old people don't like nothing changed.

Besides the river rats and the old-timers, we got the divorced child swappers. They meet every Sunday and switch their kids around. Divorce is bullshit, is all it is. It's hardest on the fucking kids. The parents don't ever buy anything on account we're closed on Sundays. One car just sits in the sun or the rain or the snow or the wind and waits for the other fucking car to show up. They never show up at the exact same time. The kids open up one car door and scoot on into the other. I was sad when I first figured out what was going on, but now it pisses me off. Don't know why. There's nothing can be done about it, I suppose. Still, it makes me a long kind of angry. It ain't right, kids drug way the hell out to nowhere on a Sunday to switch parents.

Anyways, two things make business at this cafe peculiar. They're both what's called *caveats on the deed*. One *caveat* is the place can't open on Sundays, which I already done told you. This means we don't get as much of the old folks' pensions as we could. You know, the Sunday-go-to-church crowd and all. The old folks just beg us to open up of a Sunday. They're creamin' their pants to come here after church and talk about how great the peanut butter pie is, how fresh the catfish is, and how damn young the pastor at church is. But, since we can't open on Sunday, that means I get the whole day to clean the place.

The other *caveat* is that the bathrooms must remain open to the outside public. The state fixed it that way on account of there ain't no plumbing down at the state park. A long time back, the state leased the toilets at the cafe in perpetuity for ten thousand dollars a year or some such shit. But that don't mean I get paid ten thousand dollars for cleaning them. It does mean if you're eating a hamburger and want to go to the bathroom, you have to walk out the front door and around to the north side of the building. The bathrooms are in the same building, it's just that the doors are on the outside. That's so anybody can use them anytime. That makes them real fucking dirty. Filthy. It's the worst part of the job.

On Sundays, I start cleaning the bathrooms first. I like to have the rest of the day to forget that I spent the morning cleaning up people's piss and shit. If I start the bathrooms at eight in the morning, then I got a good seven hours to disremember how fucking disgusting it is before I finish the day. It don't really work, but I like to think it does. Also, it's important to clean the bathrooms in the morning, before too many people are out at the river or on the highway.

Cleaning the bathrooms is tricky because you got to lock yourself out of the cafe and go around the outside of the building. That means you leave yourself open to any crazy son of a bitch or idiot with a flat tire or busted radiator that happens to come along. It's a hell of a lot easier to tell someone no from inside the cafe with the door locked and the door cage down. It's harder when you're standing neck deep in piss with nothing between you and them but a can of Comet and a toilet brush.

You can't help these people out. If you help one person, then word gets around. Pretty soon, every loser with something wrong within thirty miles is knocking on your door asking for help. I live here. It ain't like I can exactly leave these fuckers knocking on the door. When I'm cleaning and they hear my radio, they just stand and whine till I scream at them. They usually need to use a phone or want some water for their radiator. You can't be nice to them, else they'll just ask to come in. You can't give them an opening because they'll take it. You have to treat them rough.

"There's a fucking free-call phone next to the Coke machine!" I yell from behind the red window shade and the metal door cage. But the phone only works for calls to Amarillo. And when some poor son of a bitch doesn't know anybody in Amarillo to call, he wants to come in and use the goddamned phone book.

"We ain't got no fucking phone book on account of loaning it out just like you're asking for." It ain't true. We have phone books. It's just that I don't unlock that door for nobody. The other thing they're always asking for is a hose to fill their radiator.

"There's a fucking faucet around the side of the building between the bathrooms," I tell them.

Then they ask, "Do you have a bucket to put the water in?"

"Hell no, we ain't got no fucking buckets!" We really do, I've got empty pickle buckets running out my ears. You can't eat BBQ without pickles. You have to sound mean, that's why I cuss them. If you sound too nice, they stand at that door and beg like dogs. I don't normally go to swearing at folks, but you just got to be abrupt sometimes.

So, today I get up early and throw the old yellow slicker over my T-shirt, stomp into my black mud boots, pour baby powder over my hands, and then wedge them into some thick black gloves a chemical engineer give me one time. He stopped in to get a hamburger on his way up to Denver, and when he complained about the smell, I found myself telling him about how goddamned dirty the bathrooms get. He left a shitty tip, and I was cussing him until he came back and gave me this pair of thick black gloves. Said if they stopped your hands from burning up in sulfuric acid, he figured they'd work as good on piss. And they do. So, like I said, I'm all dressed up. I grab the pickle bucket with the toilet-cleaning shit in it and lock the door behind me. My arms and neck stick and unstick to the yellow slicker as I walk down the sidewalk to the filthy fucking toilets. As soon as I put on all that plastic, I start sweating. Walking in it makes my thighs burn. It's just damn uncomfortable, especially in summer. And then you get to the stink in the bathrooms, shit.

Now, cleaning those fucking bathrooms, that's tough. First off, when I lock myself out of the cafe, I leave myself open to whoever decides to climb up out of the river and use the bathroom or abuse the Coke machines in the front. Second, the bathrooms are fucking nasty. We don't put toilet paper or towels out there because they don't last more than an hour before somebody steals them or tries to flush them down the toilet. All you basically got is a toilet and a sink, but the bastards find ways to mess that up too.

The girls' bathroom floor is usually covered in bloody pads, used Kleenex and Diet Coke cans. Ain't no trashcans, they steal them to make fires in when it rains. Every now and then someone will write *Jesus Saves* on a wall, or some such shit. Someone wrote *Michelle is a whore* above the sink where the mirror used to be. The mirrors got busted a long time back. Someone else carved *Amanda = slut* on the back of the door. It ain't nothing bad like in the men's room. The girls' bathroom smells almost nice, like flowers all the time. But you can still smell the piss. It's just kinda behind the piss smell is this pink kinda smell.

The men's bathroom just smells like piss, shit and sweat. Some guys have a fascination with wiping their asses with crumpled newspaper, like out of a western or something. But they don't flush it. They just throw it in the corner. Of course, there's always the jerk that wants to wipe his ass on the wall or the sink. Somebody usually flicks their boogers on the sink handles or the light switch, or they hark snot balls on the walls. Neither the girls or the guys can hit the pot. Not being a girl myself, I don't know the difficulties of it, but I haven't cleaned a toilet yet—masculine or feminine—that wasn't covered head to toe in piss. Lots of blood too. Them boys bleed all over the damn place. I guess they get banged up down on the river and come up here to try and clean themselves up, but it don't work. I try to clean the bloodstains as best I can because they make the customers nervous. The regulars mostly know to save it till they get home. It only takes one trip to our bathroom, and they never want to go back.

So, I go in today with two cans of Lysol. I throw everything on the floor into trash bags. It's a filthy fucking day. There's eight empty Busch Lite beer cans, an empty Marlboro package, an empty Camels non-filter package—now, those are fucking nasty to smoke—a goddamned fucking druggy fucking HIV needle, two rubber wrappers but only one rubber, a McDonald's bag with an ATM receipt in it, a fucking pair of crapped drawers—tighty-whities—and the usual collection of newspaper, toilet paper, fast food napkins and paper towels. I drag all that shit out to the trash pit and start it burning with a cup of gasoline.

I'm sweating like a whore in church, and I ain't even halfway finished. I go back in and coat the whole damn place in one full can of Lysol and start wiping everything down with gobs of paper towels. I wipe the pubic hairs off the back of the toilet seat and off the white caps that cover the screws holding the toilet to the ground. I wipe the dried snot stains off the walls and the dried shit clumps off the side of the toilet. I wipe the bloody fingerprints and some cum stains off the wall.

I always clean the fucking bathrooms like gangbusters. I mean, they are damn clean when I finish. I pull the gum out from under the sink counter. I get on my hands and knees and clean up and behind the toilet where you can't see, but it's where everybody seems to piss. Usually as I'm cleaning the hell out the place, I get to thinking. Today it was imagining stories about the divorce kids and shit. I started by trying to guess which ones were gonna show up today. Meanwhile, I'm just cleaning the fuck out of the place. I even go back inside and get the toothbrush I use to clean the cracks of the lunch counter. I run the brush through the cracks between the tile floor and the toilet. I give the toilet lid hinges a good brushing too. All the while, I'm just kinda drifting along. Daydreaming, I guess, about the divorce kids.

Anyways, once everything was wiped down and toothbrushed, I coated the whole place with bleach and mopped it with the hot water. I usually use the faucet between the bathrooms, but the place just kinda needed the hot water today. I filled my yellow bucket and sloshed it out to the bathrooms. The hot water and bleach made me dizzy, but it worked wonders on the floor. Well, the place is fucking clean enough to eat off of when I get through, except for the fucking wall writing.

The boys can write mean. *Back to Africa Nigger; Jesus Saves; Chris Jones Sucks Cock; All Fags Die; Jose Luis Diaz RIP 08/17/98; One Less Filthy Mexican!; Elaine is a Nigger Fucker; I Love Natasha; Amarillo Sux; Just Passing Thru Goin' Back To Cali Biatches!!!; No Jesus, No Peace: Know Jesus Know Peace; Jews Killed Jesus; Jesus was a Jew; Fuck the Jews and Jesus!* Bastards can't bring toilet paper, but they always seem to have a marker with them.

Now, I told you all of that to tell you this. I hadn't painted over the walls in a while, and it was getting a might ugly again. I thought I'd go ahead and whitewash the men's room at least. I was feeling pretty good about cleaning the hell out of the place. Besides, I could crawl out of that fucking yellow rain slicker and those sweaty rubber gloves since the bathrooms wasn't contaminated anymore. I grabbed the five gallon bucket of white paint from the shed out back and hauled it around to the men's bathroom. I dunked the old brush in some turpentine and gave it a shake to loosen it up. Then I went to slapping a quick coat down. It takes about an hour to do. You don't got to worry about spilling paint on the floor or the sink or nothing. The place is so fucked up nobody would notice anyway. You just kinda hit the high spots.

I don't know how I missed it. There was a fucking clump of dried shit stuck to the wall right next to poor Elaine, the nigger fucker. Been there a while. Somebody circled it in pen and drew some hair on top. I'm pissed because I missed it. I'm pissed because it ain't right to do something like that with shit. I'm pissed because dealing with the shit and the trash and the nastiness was finished when I threw down the fucking bleach and started mopping. I couldn't just paint over the fucking thing. So I go to scraping at it with my fingernail.

I've mopped up vomit in front of a room full of staring old geezers, picked a tip out of some half-eaten coleslaw right in front of the lunch counter. All the time, grinning like an idiot happy just to have a job. But, you see, right now there ain't nobody around looking for something to feel sorry about, and I'm still fucking scraping shit off the wall with my bare fucking hands. I've done some nasty things. I ain't ever done nothing as nasty as what I was doing right then. I'm digging at it with my nail, and it hits me that this is fucking low. There ain't no good reason for any man to go digging into human shit.

I stop picking at the goddamned clump of shit and wash my hands in the sink. But there ain't no soap. There ain't hot water, and there ain't towels. I'm swinging my hands in the air looking at the shit clump stuck to the wall. I can still feel it on my nail, and I wash my hands again. But there ain't no soap, and it don't feel like it's coming off.

I'm stomping around that bathroom and swinging my hands. I'm fucking pissed at the whole fucking thing. I'm cussing, stomping, and swinging my arms. Then I stop. I ball up my fist, and I punch right through that goddamned piece of shit and right through the fucking wall. It hurts like hell. I slap my hands on either side of that hole and yell into the goddamned thing. "Fuuuuck," I yell. I ain't screamed that loud and that long over one word in a long time. It feels good.

But it just looks like a hole, could've been there for ten seconds or ten years. I don't have the time or energy to fix it. I figure I'll leave it up there till next week, let the bastards know I've been there too. I finish painting up the bathroom fast. My hand hurts.

I go back inside and start cleaning real quick-like, on account I lost an hour painting. I refill my bucket and go to mopping the storage room and sweeping up the loose cornmeal off the kitchen floor. I can still feel that piece of shit. I can still smell the bleach from the bathroom and the fresh paint. The smells mixing with burnt, cold grease make me feel sick, so I take a break.

I grab me a Coke from the fountain machine and smoke me a Marlboro in the booth by the front door. I look through the crack between the red curtain and the windowsill, watch the eighteen-wheelers make the slow climb out of the river valley as they head north into Oklahoma and on into Colorado. As I'm waiting, a Ford Escort coming from Amarillo exits off the highway and pulls into the parking lot. Sure enough, about five minutes later a beat-up Chevy step-side coming from Dumas pulls into the lot and parks beside it. A kid climbs out of the truck and skips over to the Escort.

The cowboy in the truck waves goodbye and pulls onto the highway heading back to Dumas. The Escort starts to back up, and then it stops. The passenger door opens and the kid jumps out. He slams the door and runs around the side of the cafe to the bathroom.

There's three sets of these people. One parent lives in Amarillo. The other lives in Dumas, or north of Dumas. They meet in the parking lot every Sunday or every second Sunday and swap the kids around. One couple both drive Volvos. In another couple, the man drives a BMW and the woman drives a beater station wagon, but the kids look good. They smile easy. Something's bad wrong when a kid don't smile easy. But this couple, the Chevy and Escort, they usually fight like all-get-out.

A couple of minutes later, the kid comes running around the corner and climbs back into the Escort. I can see his mother's head bobbing. She's angry at something. Sure enough, out comes the kid running at my fucking front door. He catches me peering through the window and waves. The kid's left hand is covered in white paint. He turns around to show me his shirtsleeve. It's covered too. I'm pissed because I'm already trying not to think about that fucking bathroom. I point to the door, grab some paper towels, and unlock all those fucking locks I just locked.

He's nervous. His hands are behind his back. His head's so far down he has to roll his eyes damn near his eyebrows just to look at me.

"Jesus Christ, kid, did you at least hit the pot?"

"I'm sorry, sir. My momma wants to know if you got anything to wipe this off. She said I didn't see the *Wet Paint* sign. But there wasn't any sign."

"It looks wet and smells like paint. That's the sign."

"Yes, sir." The kid gives me the fucking mopey eyes.

I throw him the paper towels and lean in the doorway. "Looks like you ran into every wall in that bathroom, kid."

"Yes, sir." He catches the paper towels smooth and rips one off. There's something he can't decide if he should tell me. He scrubs a paper towel down his arm, smearing the paint more than cleaning it up. "I was trying to see what was in that hole in your wall. It wasn't there before."

"Ain't nothing in that hole, kid."

"Yes, sir." He scrubs a little, pauses, scrubs a little more. "I wonder how that hole got there."

"Somebody punched it."

"They must have been really mad."

"Use another towel. That one's done with."

He drops the used towel on the ground and rips off a few more.

I watched him smear the paint around for a few seconds. "I figure you got most of it off you."

"Yes, sir." Then he looks up to me and asks, "Are you going to have to fix that hole?"

"And repaint that bathroom you just smeared up."

"I'm sorry."

"I made that hole, kid. I made it just this morning." I say this rubbing my fist, which scares him more than I mean to, and he steps back.

"Are you still mad?"

"Not anymore."

"Why'd you break your own wall?"

"I was trying to clean it, but it was so dirty that I had to break it."

"How dirty does it get before you have to break it?"

"Christ, kid, I don't know." I watch another semi head up the hill. The kid starts on his fourth paper towel.

"You live with your momma?"

"Yes."

"Ever wish you could live with both your mom and dad together?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ever wish you that you could live with both your mom and dad so much that you punched the wall?"

He's finished wiping the paint around. It don't look much better, but it's dry.

"No, sir." He don't know what I'm getting at.

"That's good, kid. Ain't no call to punch a hole in a wall. Get on back to your momma."

He apologizes one more time as he wads up the used paper towels. He looks around for a trashcan, but there ain't one. I open my palm, and he drops the crumpled paper towels into my hand. Now both of his hands are covered in paint, but it looks to be dry. He gives a wave and runs back to his momma. I go inside and peer through the window. The car rolls across the lot to the exit. Even though he can't see me, the kid waves at the window as he rides past. The Escort pulls slow onto the highway and heads back to Amarillo.

Sunday custody handover.

I light me up a fresh Marlboro and settle into the booth. Just when I've finished my second smoke and pretty much stopped thinking about the kid and the hole and started thinking about finishing for the day, there's this fucking horrendous knocking on the door.

"What?"

"You got a bucket for this faucet? Got a hole in my radiator hose."

"Hell no, we ain't got no fucking buckets!"

But we do.

I almost gave him one. People get down sometimes. Maybe a fellow should help them out now and then.

Gas Station Story

She was always certain, Sam thought. Her guesses, her assumptions, her beliefs, they were all facts to her. He didn't know how to handle that kind of certainty during a fight, so he had fled their house for the corner gas station. He needed to buy some snuff anyway. And now he was standing in line behind an East Indian teen with giant arms and a thick neck, and that teen was stealing a lighter. The kid dropped the black Bic into his jacket pocket when the lady behind the counter wasn't looking. Sam wasn't sure how he felt about the theft. He had stolen his share of stuff as a teenager, but he was married now and, standing in line behind the kid, the theft looked pointless and ugly. That thought made Sam feel old. Not mature, just old.

The kid paid for a Coke and left. Sam watched him walk out of the store in a security mirror behind the counter. The door chime announced his exit. He asked the lady for a can of Copenhagen. He had called her a bitch. He threw the plant at the wall and screamed, "Why are you such a fucking bitch?" Then he fled. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he ran away.

He asked for the Copenhagen because he had decided a month earlier that he needed to get away from smoking altogether if he really was going to quit. It was starting to dawn on him that he had merely switched a bad habit for a disgusting one. But she had known. She hadn't believed he was quitting for a second.

He paid the lady and headed out of the gas station. The thief and a couple of his friends stood around a new black BMW parked next to Sam's Tempo. It could have been worse. Of course, he would never have hit her, but it would have been almost as easy as throwing the plant. He could have taken two strong steps toward her, but he had thrown the plant instead. Throwing it had caused a chain reaction. The plant hit the wall and landed beside the dog. The dog yelped and jumped into her lap. She cradled the dog and called him an asshole. Then Sam fled.

He crumpled the Copenhagen receipt and tossed it into the ashtray by the ice machine. He nodded to a kid leaning on the trunk of the BMW as he walked to his own car. He thought it was better to acknowledge them. The kids seemed to be waiting for more to show up. The thief with the thick neck and another East Indian stood beside the open passenger door. Their open door was next to his driver's door, and the bass from their stereo thumped Sam's chest as he climbed in.

His car was full of paper coffee cups and old gas station receipts. He wondered if the teens had noticed. The kid that stole the lighter looked good. His friends were dressed like black American kids, just like most of the other East Indian kids, but the thief looked sharp in his black leather jacket. That kid had style. His parents had raised a kid who knew how to be cool. She, of course, would be a great mother. He could hold his own. At least, he could be better than his own father. He knew how *not to* raise a kid. Knowing how to raise one was simply the other side of the coin. But something was holding her back. She was stubborn.

The key was in the ignition. His hands were on the wheel, but he wasn't ready to go home. The thought scared him, but he didn't have any other place to go.

He decided to wash the car.

He crawled back out of the dirty Tempo. The kids stared at him. He looked the thick-necked one in the eye to let him know that it wasn't him he was scared of. Sam wondered if the kid had stolen the black lighter on purpose or if the one he stole just happened to be black. He himself always bought black lighters. He didn't believe in dressing up a bad habit with fancy colors. Before he had switched to snuff, he bought a lot of lighters. He knew she hid them, but she always denied it. The teen stared back at Sam. They held each other's eyes for a heartbeat. Sam's eyes broke first, and the defeat agitated him. He made a show of locking the car door. Then he ducked his head and walked swiftly into the gas station. He went straight to the counter.

"Can I get a car wash?"

"Bronze, Silver, Gold or Platinum?"

"What's the difference?" Sam was going to get the cheapest, but he was curious.

"I don't know. I just started yesterday." He waited for her to reach for a book to find the answer, but she just stared at him. "You were here when that kid was here," she said.

"What kid?"

"The East Indian kid." He didn't like the way she said *East Indian*. She looked East Indian. He's no kid, lady, Sam thought. He must weigh over two-hundred pounds.

"Maybe, I'm not sure. He might have been Indian."

"I know he was Indian. Did you see him do anything?" She was looking directly at him. He wanted to flee, but he stayed. He stayed silent. "Well?" the lady said.

"What?"

"The *Paki*, what did he do? You were standing right behind him." She had used the word to make him uncomfortable. He could see it in her eyes. He thought of a piece of bathroom graffiti. *Paki, Paki, don't be blue. Yellow Cab will hire you.*

"No, I wasn't." He just wanted to wash his car. He hadn't softened it. He didn't say, *Why are you being a bitch?* or *Don't be such a bitch.* He said, *You fucking bitch!* He hadn't known he was going to say it. It was something his father would have said.

"Fine," the woman said. Her name tag read Natasha. He thought Natasha was an odd name for an East Indian, if she was Indian. Was it Hindi or Hindu? He never knew. The lady turned around to count packs of cigarettes. He wanted to tell her that turning her back on a customer was exactly how she had gotten herself robbed.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes?" She turned back around.

"How much does Platinum cost?"

She rested her brown hands on the counter and stared directly at him. "What?"

"I would like a Platinum car wash, please." He had asked for the most expensive wash to get some respect from the East Indian and to punish his wife. But he knew it didn't mean a damn thing to either of them.

"Fifteen dollars."

"For a fucking car wash?" Had he really sworn at her? He cringed, then confessed with a sigh, "He grabbed a black lighter, dropped it into his jacket pocket when you weren't looking."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"I wasn't sure if he was stealing it. I thought he was going to pay for it."

"But he didn't pay for it, and you let him walk out of here." She stared right at him. "Do you know him?"

"No. No, I don't know anything. I don't know him. I thought maybe you did. I've never seen him. He's still out there in the parking lot with his friends." Saying this, he pointed through the window to where his Tempo and the BMW were parked.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

She had so much power, so much righteousness. It was as if she had never known fear. He only wanted her to realize that they were a team, that his opinion must count too. They both needed to come together. He could be impenetrable too, if he wanted. The dog, well, he had been as surprised as the dog.

The lady said it again, "Why didn't you stop him?"

Because he probably had a gun, because I was thinking about punching my wife, because I was wondering what it would be like to be him, because I didn't know how it would end.

"Because I didn't have the strength to force the moment to its crisis." Quoting poetry was a trick he used on his wife to stop her arguments, to send them in another direction.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's from a poem." He dug into his pocket and handed the lady a wrinkled twenty. "Here, for the car wash and the lighter the kid stole."

"You want to pay for the lighter?" She was studying him.

"Well, you're right. I shouldn't have let it happen. I should have stopped him. I don't know if I could have, but I should have."

She didn't move her hands from the counter. "I didn't say you should have done anything. I asked you why you didn't do anything."

"Just take it, OK?"

With a disapproving look, she rang up the car wash and the lighter. She slid the change and receipt to him. He could feel her eyes on him as he left the store. It was only a kid. Even if she didn't believe it, he could raise one.

Sam paused outside the door. It was the first day he had worn his sandals. Earlier in the day, the sun had felt glorious on his arms. His toes had felt hotter than his arms. He guessed that this was because his toes hadn't seen as much sun as his arms. He used to be ashamed of his feet, but he was beginning not to care. Two weeks before Sam married, his mother had told him that if he ever hit his wife, she would find him and beat him good with a bat.

Sam could see the kids staring at him, and he was a little afraid to walk past them again. Summer was coming. He couldn't wait for those long summer nights. He would sit on the back step, nurse a beer, and listen to his wife talk about the news. He didn't agree with most of what she said, but she made him laugh sometimes. The first nights of summer were wonderful. He worked in the yard until ten. He liked to work in the yard. He pulled weeds until it was almost too dark to see, imagining his life in different ways. He felt peaceful when he did it. He liked that feeling. Today the spring wind gave him a chill. He should have worn a jacket. His wife usually made him put one on. But they were fighting, and she didn't care. The kids were studying him closely now. He had been standing in front of the door too long.

She cared.

They were still looking at him. The car wasn't that dirty. He would get his money back and wash the car in the summer, after the spring rains. He would explain to her that he hadn't meant it. He was getting a little fat. He was too tall and skinny to carry a soft round belly. The wind gusted. He shivered. Sam gave the kids a scowl to show them he wasn't frightened and turned to enter the gas station again.

The lady watched him approach the counter. Did she have to buy the shirt with the gas station name on it, or did they give it to her?

"I changed my mind. I don't need the car wash. I'm going to wash it at home in the summer."

"You're planning to wash your car three months from now?"

"I'm waiting until after the spring rains."

"It's not raining."

She wasn't making this easy.

"I'm waiting for all of the spring rains. Not just today."

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes, dismissing his logic. She held out one tiny brown hand. "I need the receipt." The lines on her palm were dark rivers in a pale plain. She took the receipt and gave him back seventeen dollars and some change.

"I thought it was fifteen."

She stared at him again. "I gave you back the money for the lighter."

"OK." Teamwork, meeting halfway, finally. He wanted to ask her why, but something much more stupid came out. "Are you Indian?"

"Canadian."

"Oh, OK," he said. He thought that had gone about as bad as it could have. "I have to return the Copenhagen too. I'm quitting, turning over a new leaf, going to be a daddy." He dragged the new can out of his pocket and placed it on the counter. Sam tried to smile, but there was too much else behind it. It looked like a wince.

"Receipt," she said.

"I threw it in the trash outside." It's never easy, Sam thought.

She sighed and punched some buttons on the register. When it opened, she slid the money to him.

"Does the chime bother you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Does the door chime bother you when it dings? It would give me a headache."

"Then maybe you should quit coming here."

"I'm sorry. I just . . . I don't know. I just thought that maybe the bell—" He had turned and was pointing toward the door when she cut him off.

"Do you need anything else?" Need? What else did he need? He needed her to give him a goddamned break. He needed to keep his mouth shut. He needed to grow up. That's what she had said just before the plant met the wall.

"Should I have confronted him? And then what? What would he have done?" But she just stared at him. He could see the answer on her face. It didn't matter what the kid would have done. That wasn't the point. Sam turned, saying nothing, and stormed out of the gas station.

He ran into the Indian kids entering. The big one was in front.

"Fuck him up, Suneel," somebody called, and the group of boys laughed.

"Are you paying for that lighter?" he said in anger, surprising himself a little. Suneel seemed taken aback. He looked guilty, but he raised one clenched fist in front of Sam's face. "She was asking about it," Sam said quickly.

"You told her I stole it?"

"You shouldn't have."

Suneel brought his fist close to Sam's face. "Didn't steal it." He opened his palm. The little black lighter rested there among some change. "Just forgot about it. I can afford a lighter."

Sam wasn't too shocked. That was the way the day was going.

Suneel started to enter the store, but Sam wanted to console him. He needed to ease the situation, to add his own words. "Your father would be proud."

Suneel stopped, looked at him, laughed. "Yeah, yours too, jerk. Yours too," he said and entered the gas station.

Sam watched Suneel walk to the counter. The lady smiled and took the change. Sam shivered. He felt the rest of the kids staring at him, and he turned to face them. They were not smiling. He pointed to his car and walked quickly toward it. He had to pass through the group, but the kids did not move for him. He smiled to show how embarrassed he was as he weaved through them. He shrugged to let them know that it couldn't be helped, that he was insane. He wanted desperately to turn back and address them just before he climbed inside his car, but he knew that he had nothing to say to them. Maybe in summer, Sam thought as he drove away. Maybe in the summer.

Broken Beautiful

Her name was Ling, but she was not Asian. James never asked her what her real name was. She had smiled and offered him a massage after she told him that he could go ahead and wash The Pink Spot's front windows. It didn't matter to her, she said, because they were tinted so dark she couldn't see out of them anyway.

It was the same courtesy he offered all the warehouse owners. But he felt traitorous to the Board when he first extended the offer to the massage parlour. When The Pink Spot stretched its hours to three in the morning, the Board could not ignore the fact that the business sold something more than a massage. They had called the police and the lawyers. The police wouldn't do anything, the lawyers sued for eviction. The lawsuit was pending. The Pink Spot was still open.

He pretended not to hear Ling offer the massage. He thanked her, she smiled at him, and he went outside to wash the windows. She was right, the windows were so dark that he could not see inside unless he placed his forehead on the glass and cupped his hands around his eyes. Ling caught him doing this and laughed. He could just make her out, giggling behind the counter. He had blushed and smiled. He felt silly, unsure where all of this was coming from.

***

"Snow in May," James said as he pushed the cold aluminum ladder against the warehouse wall. It was a ways up, and he had to extend the ladder to its full height just to reach the roof. It didn't occur to him to place the ladder at the roof's lowest point. The camera was at the peak, some ten feet higher, so he climbed up at the peak. He clicked the steel toes of his boots on the underside of the rungs as he climbed, and his warm hands turned cold as they reached, grabbed, and pulled him to the top and into the wind.

The ladder was stained with paint and tar, the soft aluminum scratched and dented. A small piece of two-by-four screwed to the left rail covered and reinforced an ugly Sawzall cut that had almost ended the ladder's life. James himself had put every one of those cuts, dents and stains on that ladder. He remembered buying it new from Revy. The Warehouse Association gave him two hundred dollars for a ladder, and he bought a good one, light and strong. The ladder was too big for his little red pickup. He had to wedge one end against the truck's tailgate and leave five feet sticking over the cab, aluminum horns. The ladder scratched the roof of the cab where it rested. He also bought the truck new, but no one paid for it. That was all his money. He knew every scratch and dent on it. He had put those there too.

It was a good truck, ten years old now. The lifters in the engine rattled, and the warehouse owners could hear them clicking when James drove in first gear around the complex to lock the dumpsters and pick up the trash. The owners made fun of the noise. He told them the truck wasn't noisy, just throaty—throaty like a nightclub singer from a late-night black and white movie. He thought those singers were beautiful and sad at the same time. He called them broken beautiful. Though he never told anyone else that. The ladder, the truck, the beautiful woman in black and white with the wicked cigarette, they were all broken beautiful.

***

He had quickly pulled his forehead off the glass and begun washing The Pink Spot's windows. Ling came outside soon after. She closed the door slowly behind her, looked around the parking lot, and stuffed her hands into her back pockets. He was unsure whether to acknowledge her or continue washing the windows.

"Can anyone use that gazebo in the back courtyard?"

Her question surprised him, and he repeated the same statement he read in the monthly newsletters he slid under the warehouse doors. "The gazebo is open to all of the owners and their employees." He had been crouching at the water bucket, and he raised himself uncomfortably to talk to her. He knew she would not use the gazebo, and he knew the Board would not let her use it. She must have heard what happened when some Pink Spot girls tried to join the Warehouse Association barbecue, how the Board members shamed them out of the courtyard. Standing under that gazebo, guarding paper plates heaped with chicken and hot dogs, some Board members told the girls there wasn't any food left, that the party was almost over anyway. One man said to his wife, but loud enough for everyone to hear, "I bet there are plenty of wieners back at their place." The man took a quick bite of his hot dog and turned away laughing.

Ling smiled at James and looked out across the parking lot. He had expected her to go back inside, but she did not. She just smiled at him.

"I painted that gazebo roof green three summers ago. It still looks new."

"Yeah, it looks new." She nodded, smiled. She did not care.

He continued, "It took three days and three coats of paint. The wood was so weathered that it drank the paint." She just smiled at him. There was something in that smile that he did not understand. "The Board thought I could have done it faster. I told them I could have done it in a day, but a year later it wouldn't look like I had painted it at all."

He was relieved when she cut him off. "Well, I'd better get back in." One more smile and she was back behind the tinted glass. He finished washing the window, painfully aware that she could see him and that he could not see her. At every swipe of the squeegee, every bend to the water bucket, he wanted to peer through the mirrored window and check.

***

Two batteries per camera, four cameras per building, six separate buildings, James was going to be up on the roof all day. The bag of batteries in his left hand grew heavier with every step up the ladder. They weren't even real cameras. They were dummies. The only electronics in them were little red lights that blinked on and off. It had been a year since the cameras were installed, and the batteries were dying.

It was snowing in May. It was snowing Styrofoam mouse turds. They weren't flakes. They were tiny little white balls. They looked like a mouse had eaten a block of Styrofoam and was shitting it out, one tiny pellet at a time. They didn't melt. The tiny pellets bounced off James's glasses, landed on the roof, and started the slow roll to the eavestrough. Watching those pellets roll, James figured that he had spent at least one full month of his life on those six metal roofs. He had tarred over leaks, washed eavestroughs and awnings, screwed down loose metal sheets, and fixed seized turbines.

He did not quite think of the roof as a separate world, but being alone on the white metal roof did mean something to him. He liked walking carefully between the six-inch-wide ridges in the metal, the slant of the slick roof always pushing a little harder against one leg than the other. It was not a different world. It was not a place of rest or worship, there was too much work for that. But there was something to being alone and above things. The only exit was his thin ladder tied to an eavestrough so that it could not blow down.

***

A week after their first meeting, James saw Ling smoking in the back of The Pink Spot. He was locking the dumpsters for the weekend. She waved and walked out to him.

“Working hard, or hardly working?” he said. It was a stupid thing to say.

“Yeah.” There was that smile again. She smiles so much she might be goofy, he thought.

“If I don’t lock them up, they’re filled with couches and refrigerators by Monday.” He pointed his thumb at the green dumpsters.

“Yeah.” She nodded her head, smiled, “My name’s Ling. What’s yours?”

“James.”

“Hello, James.” She looked into his eyes, measured him.

“Hello.”

“Yeah, hello.” She laughed. He wasn’t sure if she was laughing at him. She dropped her cigarette and ground it out. She took a sweeping look around the back courtyard. "Okay." Her eyes returned to James. She studied him, "See you around, James."

"See you," he said, but she was already walking back to work.

***

The Board had purchased the cameras to get a discount on their insurance and to try and cut down on some of the break-ins. But really they bought the cameras to intimidate The Pink Spot customers. From the beginning, its customers were notoriously sly parkers. They would never park in front of a massage parlour. They parked in front of the fish market, the tea store, or the Muslim Cultural Association and walked down to The Pink Spot. They also parked behind the warehouses, blocking the overhead doors of the neon sign company, the cleaning supply company, and the National Wildlife Preservation Council, which was really just a fancy name for a hunting organization.

The cameras were not all aimed at the front and back doors of The Pink Spot, but the majority were. The cameras did their job. The men took to parking on a side street, in front of a different warehouse complex altogether. They now walked half a block to The Pink Spot's back door. Nearly every thirty minutes from eleven in the morning until three at night, a nervous man would take the long route from a side street through the center courtyard and into The Pink Spot to have an official Japanese shiatsu massage under the lotioned hands of Mistress Ling. James often thought that by the time the men had made the walk to the business park, they really needed that massage.

The first camera was stuck shut. James had to take his little screwdriver and cram it into the seam to force the lid off. He replaced the two C batteries and reassembled the camera. He had to lie on his stomach to reach the camera arm, and then he had to lean very far over the edge to aim the camera in the right direction. The wind blew over his head and down the back of his Levis. The cold from the metal roof was starting to leak through his flannel shirt, and a tight, uncomfortable wind was splitting his buttocks. He did not hate his job, but he knew there were better ones.

Leaning over the edge, James could see the green gazebo roof. The paint had started peeling only a month after he bragged about it to Ling. She never mentioned it. He did not know if she had forgotten his boast, but he gave her credit for not bringing it up.

***

They met at the dumpsters several times. He did not know if she planned it, but he found himself hurrying to catch her at the dumpsters every Friday. She always offered a massage just before she crushed out her cigarette to return to work. She would look down at the butt and raise her eyes to meet his. The act made her look shy. She would turn and wave before she closed the door behind her. He always stayed, watched her walk to that door, waited for that wave. And he always ignored her offers, pretended he did not hear them. But he blushed, could not help it, and she always smiled.

He did hear that she grew up in a *dink* town just outside of the city. He heard that her boyfriend wanted her to quit working, and he heard that she was sick of covering shifts for Cindi, the boss's girlfriend. He listened to fragments of her life and found her quite beautiful.

She told him that the boss, Billy, was a dangerous man. That he talked constantly about the cameras the Board had installed to intimidate his customers. Ling said Billy wanted to burn the whole complex down and claim the insurance. Billy told the girls a burned building was worth more than he had made off them in the last year anyway. James did not mention the threat to the Board. He did not want to explain how he had heard it.

***

The cuts and scrapes on his hands stung in the wind. The metal roof was a collection of jagged ends with sharp curls of poorly cut metal that ripped jeans, tore boots, and left razor-thin cuts on the insides of his wrists. The cuts seeped blood that smeared into a pink haze around them. The late winter wind whispered along the thin edge of his wounds, stinging and freezing along the way. James had so many cuts in his hands that he did not acknowledge them as wounds any more.

He had a scar on his right calf from when he almost slid off the roof during a sudden spring rain. His Levis caught on a jagged edge, and then the meat of his calf caught on the same three-inch metal curl. He had already resigned himself to going over. When his flesh caught on the metal, he did not know whether to be upset or relieved. He hung for a static second, connected to the roof, neither going up nor going down. Thirty stitches, fifteen staples, a month off work, and his calf finally healed. He still wore the jeans. It took sixty stitches to put them in working order after the paramedics cut them off. He had counted the stitches out of curiosity. He sewed the tear crudely, and the repaired denim bunched tightly around his calf. The knotted thread and denim bumped uncomfortably along the purple keloid.

Adjusting the camera was difficult. When James was on the roof, he could not see what the camera looked like from below. He would aim the dummy at the massage parlour's back door. But when he climbed down to check, the camera would be aimed at the back of the smoke shop across the courtyard, at the driveway, or at the clouds dropping their little pellets.

James felt something as he did this. He had not been around when the Board decided upon the cameras, and he did not see the harm in the massage parlour. Other than the parking problem it caused for the surrounding stores, James did not understand the problem. They were only working girls. But the Board had decided and was adamant. James, of course, did not argue with the Board, but he felt something when changing the batteries.

***

She always started the conversations, and she always ended them. She always wore that smile. They had met at the dumpsters almost every Friday for eight weeks.

"I'm sick of hanging around trash. I have to work with trash all day. I don't want to spend my breaks around trash." She smiled at him, looked at the gazebo, and raised her eyebrows.

"The dumpsters don't bother me. I found a computer monitor in there one time. I just replaced the cord and it worked like a charm."

"Okay, let's try it this way." She took a step toward to him, "We need to talk, James."

"Okay." He wondered if she was in trouble and, guiltily, if she was going to ask for money.

"I want to sit down, James. I mean I really need to sit down, *James*."

"Okay."

"You know where I'd like to sit with you, *James*."

"Where?"

"At that gazebo you painted."

"Oh." He flinched even though he had known it was coming.

"Yeah, oh." She raised her hands and shook them around her head, "Oh." He flinched again, and she smiled. He had never met someone who smiled when they were hurt. It threw him off. She stuck her hands in her back pockets and looked out across the courtyard. She was smiling even though she wasn't looking at him. It cut him. He could not say anything. He grabbed a full trash bag stacked in front of the dumpster and tried to toss it in. The bag split open, spilling its contents down his jeans into a pile on his shoes. She walked backwards a few steps, her hands still in her jeans' pocket. She removed her right hand, opened and closed it as if she were waving to a child, and mouthed *goodbye* to him. She turned to walk back to The Pink Spot. At the door, she did not look back at him.

***

He found out after two weeks of locking the dumpsters alone. He went inside The Pink Spot and asked if he could wash the outside windows because they were dirty again. They were not dirty, but the lie got him through the door. He casually asked Cindi where Ling was. Cindi watched him shift helplessly, painfully. She pressed a button somewhere behind the reception desk, and Ling appeared in the narrow hallway, partially hidden by two pots of yellowed bamboo. She was not James's Ling.

Advertisements for The Pink Spot ran indefinitely on prepaid accounts in the back of most of the city's tabloids. The turnover in the massage parlour business was high. There always had to be a Mistress Ling, a Nurse Cindi, and a Russian Natasha. The girls were assigned names when they were hired. This new Ling was also not Asian. She was not nice, and she did not smoke.

***

The snow was falling the same as when he climbed up the ladder thirty minutes ago. Tiny pellets fell hard on his glasses, bounced on the white roof and rolled, always rolled, down the slope to the eavestrough. The third camera, the camera nearest The Pink Spot, sent him over the edge. The camera lid was stuck. When he pried with his screwdriver, he snapped the plastic case, and three of the four screws hit the slick metal roof and skidded toward the eavestrough along with the snow pellets.

He knew he was going to fall even before he made the lunge. It was stupid. The eavestrough would have caught the screws, and he could have picked them up with ease. Instead, he lunged. It was the first sudden movement he had made all day. He had been squatting near the edge of the roof in order to pry the camera open. Then he lunged. One finger briefly grazed the edge of a cold screw as it skidded into the eavestrough, but his shoulders, and then the rest of his body, went over the edge.

His right hand caught on the underside of a poorly cut metal edge, and a rip opened in his flesh from the bottom of his palm to the tip of his index finger. In fact, James left the tip of his right index finger on that jagged metal curl. Though his right hand caught on the metal edge, the rest of his body began its descent. This twisted James's arm into an awkward position behind his head. The force of his body falling against his poorly positioned arm separated his shoulder. When his fingertip finally tore from his body, James plunged into perfect air. No longer connected to the roof, James simply fell. His glasses slid down his nose and off his face during his first and only rotation. His right arm hung dead, bleeding, and pointing to the place he would eventually land. His left hand pointed to the sky and then the ground. James landed shortly after it.

His chest crushed his glasses, which had arrived before him. His chin hit the pavement just a breath after his chest. His two top teeth cut through his bottom lip, and his jaw disintegrated into a hundred tiny fragments.

James was stuck to the pavement. He could not move. His arm, the one with the missing fingertip, lay across the small of his back. Blood pooled slowly but steadily from his broken chin. James's visible world was a seven-inch horizon of pavement. A slow-moving red current seeped in from the bottom of his sightline. His nose touched the pavement, and his chin sounded like a bag of loose rocks when he tried to turn his neck.

James accepted all of this immediately. He knew almost before he lunged that he was going over, and he knew what going over meant. He was not scared. He was in great pain, but he was accepting. He would have to wait until help arrived. It was two hours after closing time. He might have to wait a while. But somebody would come soon. The Pink Spot was just three doors down, and somebody would certainly show up there within the next half-hour.

"I could use that massage now, Mistress Ling," James thought as he watched the blood from his chin flow past the tip of his nose and into clear sight just an inch from his eyes.

And it was Ling, the new Ling, that discovered James. "Oh shit! Get out here, Billy. The janitor guy fell off the roof. He's bleeding all over the fucking place!"

Billy did come out, but he was not very kind to James. James, of course, worked for the Board, and the Board had waged a small war against Billy and his Pink Spot. Billy could not keep his customers. They distrusted the cameras and resented the signs that told them of the cameras' existence. Billy was inclined to let James bleed to death on the pavement.

"Fuck him," Billy told Ling. "Get your ass back inside." Ling looked once more at the back of James's head and the blood that pooled around it before she closed the door. James could not move his body to see these people talking about him. The door had closed. He assumed that Billy had gone inside with the woman. But seconds later, James heard footsteps approaching his body. He smelled cigarette smoke and felt the man's breath on his ear. James tried to turn his neck away, but he was in shock.

"I could let you die here," Billy said. "I could hold your face in your own fucking blood until you drowned."

Having said this, Billy walked away.

James was too helpless to be scared. He could not control the situation, so he waited. James did not want to die. He had not wanted to fall off of the roof, though it now seemed to him that he had almost known he was going to do it. But now that he was down here and helpless, it was not worth thinking about what he could have done up there.

Drowning in blood, drowning in his own wounds—James thought of his cuts and scars and dents and scratches and how he had marked his life with those wounds. He thought of dying three doors down from a whorehouse. He thought of the beautiful woman with the wicked cigarette. For the first time, he felt the tobacco smoke burning in her lungs. He knew that if he died, all that would be left of him would be a bloodstain, a faded red spot on a parking lot. He thought of the way it had hurt him to see Ling smile, and he smiled. He knew it must look like a bloody grimace.

The Enabler

"There is a two hundred pound woman named Wanda in Atlantic City. She has no legs and no arms. She uses her tongue to play an electric keyboard for loose change." I wait for the image to settle. They're all younger than me by at least five years, and it's not hard to impress them. I spent five years in the Army before I could go to university, and I have the best stories. "She plays the Star Spangled Banner from eight to five every day, and then she's gone. Every morning, somebody drags that hunk of flesh from some hovel and deposits her in front of the same abandoned bar. Then he drags her away." It is a true story, and they are English graduate students. They love the misery because they don't have enough of their own. "That same somebody puts her on her stomach on a hand-truck in front of the keyboard. They set a tin cup in front of the cart and lean a piece of cardboard with her name on it up against the cup."

I use the story to stop the conversation at the table. It's not fair, but they are talking theory again. They read enough literature to want to be dangerous. They are young, anxious and ambitious. They're also English majors, so they cut their career lust with doses of empathetic voyeuristic misery. I give them Wanda. It's the only thing I have to offer. Just my knowing of her makes them awed and envious.

I tell the story about Wanda to scare them a bit, to keep their infatuation with me going. But the smart ones are beginning to see through me. The idiots laugh, and a few just stare. I take a sip of beer.

***

"Are you going to Indiana?"

"Yeah." I had seen him around Headquarters, didn't know him.

"I'm Gordon." He held out his hand. "Want to split the gas?"

"You going?" I hadn't taken the offered hand. I lost sight of it staring at his eyelashes. They looked as thick and soft as a puppy's.

"Eight weeks in Bloomington, learning Chinese at Indiana University on the Army's dime? I'm going." His offered hand rose and turned into a waiting high-five. I hated high-fives, but there was something about him.

"I'm going to find a corn-fed farm girl to fuck all night, every night," I said. I had been practising that line since I found out I was going.

"I'm going to drink."

*

We stopped for the night three hours outside of Bloomington. We got drunk in the hotel bar. Gordon started a fight, but it was just a shoving match. I helped him to our room after they threw us out.

I woke early to piss. We hadn't closed the curtains, and the lights from the parking lot lit the room a soft orange. Sometime in the night, Gordon had thrown up in the sink. It looked like he had played with the vomit. It was smeared on the mirror. It was dried on the light switch. There was more in the little room with the toilet and the bath. The shower curtain was ripped down, and vomit was smeared over the toilet seat and lid. Long, strange streaks had dried on the inside of the bathtub. It smelled like shit in the little room. I turned on the light to check. It wasn't vomit. I went back to bed.

I woke to Gordon humming and cleaning the bathroom with the white towels.

"Ever try to shit in a sink when you're drunk?"

"No." I had only really known him for three days.

"It's messy. You should probably watch TV until I get this cleaned up. Can you call and ask for some more towels?" He held up a dirty towel for me to see and tossed it into the bathtub.

Everyone loved him at Indiana. He knew everyone, and they truly loved him. He partied every night. I went with him. We threw wild parties in my dorm room. It was the best summer of my life.

He stopped by my room one afternoon sometime in the middle of the language program.

"I failed that verb test. I was too hung."

He *had been* hungover. But on the way from the dorms to the test, he'd asked me to swing by the liquor store. I thought he was buying for after the test. He came out of the store with a bagged bottle of wine and crawled back into the cab with a groan. He unscrewed the lid and took a small whiff.

"Best hangover cure ever," he said and chugged half of the bottle.

Looking at him, standing a day later in my room, I asked, "Were you drunk or hungover?"

"When you get where I am at, it's pretty much the same thing," he said, and I laughed with him. I laughed too hard, and he stopped, letting it pass. "I cheated on my wife last night." He fell back on my bed, threw his arms wide. He made a couple of snow angels and then shook a smoke out of his pack. I had forgotten that he had a wife. "It was only oral sex. I know some guys don't count that. But I can't imagine feeling worse about it. It might as well have been fucking. What do you think?"

"With who?"

"Doesn't really matter, does it?" He took a long pull from his cigarette. He smoked the generic brand, and I smoked Marlboros. He made fun of me, said I was wasting beer money on nicotine. But I knew that Marlboros were cooler.

"No, it doesn't matter." But I wanted to know. "Are you going to tell her?"

"No. She loves me. She loves me because I make her laugh. I think if I made her cry, she'd reconsider. She knows about the drinking, and she's OK with that." He took another long inhale. "If I threw fucking-around into the mix, she would leave. Anyway, it won't happen again." He lifted himself upright on the bed and looked at me. "Don't tell anybody, OK? Nobody."

It felt like a threat. "I'm not saying anything. I don't even know who it was."

"Great. Let's go get a drink."

*

We stayed friends after the Indiana summer. He wasn't in the same unit, but he lived on-base near my barracks. We would go and drink in Baltimore until the bars closed at two and then haul ass to D.C. to catch last call just before three. He called me late one night in winter. He had been drinking alone at his house. His wife was visiting her parents in Ohio. He hadn't wanted to go to the bars when she was gone. He liked to sit at home alone and look at old photographs when she wasn't there.

"Can you come over here? I hurt myself. It could be bad." It was a very mumbled sentence, and I rushed to his house.

He was sitting on the front steps wearing Rollerblades and holding a bloody rag to his face. The streetlights lit him in orange. It was the same light from that first Indiana night. That same fuzzy orange lit the streets in Baltimore's Inner Harbor and D.C's Georgetown. It was the light that knew him best, and I knew him best in it.

"I think I hurt myself."

I carefully pulled the rag away from his face and pushed his hands into his lap. Two bottom teeth were punched through the skin under his lip.

"It's pretty bad. We need to go to the hospital."

"Can't go to the hospital. Drunk." He shook his head very slowly. "They hate drunks in the emergency room. Be there for hours. Just fix it."

"This is going to hurt," I said, enjoying too much the feeling of caring for him.

"Hurts now." He glared at me. Even when he's drunk, he can read me.

I pulled his bottom lip up and off his teeth as gently as I could. The hole in his skin was now much smaller, and it didn't seem that bad anymore.

"Let's go wash this blood off and see what the damage is."

I tried to stand him up, but he was wearing Rollerblades. I sat him down carefully and unlaced his blades. He wasn't wearing socks. I helped him, barefoot, back into the house.

He was at my barracks room the next morning with a box wrapped in Sunday comics. A round Band-Aid covered the wound. I let him in. I was confused. He had never given me anything before.

"Thanks for helping me out last night." He handed me the box and sat on my desk. "I went to the store after you left. I got there at five in the morning, had to wait until ten for the place to open. I spent most of that time passed out in the car."

I opened the gift, staring at him uncomfortably. I had helped him upstairs, put him under the sheets. I even brought him a cool washcloth for his lip. He must have left right after I did.

"Rollerblades?"

"I thought you could come over and skate with me and Lori. We're trying to learn how to play street hockey."

"Sounds great."

I had only spoken with his wife a few times. Gordon usually met me at my room. It felt like he had decided to adopt me, and I accepted it greedily.

"Yeah. Well, got to go." He slapped his thighs, jumped off the desk, and walked out the door. I placed the Rollerblades on the desk and crawled back into bed.

*

I had known Gordon for almost two years. I spent most of my free time with him and his wife. It started with the weekend street hockey but soon spread to movies and holidays. I watched *Seinfeld* at their house on Thursday nights. My drinking slowed. Gordon's maintained the same pace. I drank with him only three or four times a month, but he had found others to fill in for me.

One night during the Christmas holidays, I bought a twelve-pack and went over to watch movies with them. They only had one couch in their living room, and we were all squeezed onto it underneath a blanket. Gordon had started out in the middle of the couch, between me and Lori, but he made too many trips to the refrigerator to get beer. Lori moved to the middle, next to me, during his fourth trip. The move gave him easier access to the fridge.

Halfway through the second movie, Gordon went upstairs to bed. I got up for my third beer a few minutes later. The box was empty. He had drunk ten of the twelve beers. Though I could have guessed it, the empty box was shocking.

It was the first time I had been this kind of alone with Lori. She had not moved over when Gordon left. She redistributed the wool blanket between us, but she didn't move her body away from mine. When I returned to the couch with my beer, I did not try to make room either. Our bodies were tight together underneath that blanket—

And I squeezed her hand when she grabbed mine. It was easy to do because I couldn't see our hands underneath the wool. I watched the movie, eyes straight ahead, squeezing her hand when she squeezed mine. She rested her head on my shoulder, but I didn't know how to begin to try anything else.

She left to check on Gordon a short time later. I watched her walk up the stairs, but she did not come back. I turned the TV off, picked up the empties, and turned out the lights. I locked their door and went back to the barracks.

*

Two months after the movie night, four-thirty in the morning, the only light on in their kitchen was the one under the range hood. Her back was to me.

"He's too drunk. They won't release him. The car is totaled," she said. Gordon had told me she was a cheerleader in high school, and I could see it in the way she stood in front of the sink. She placed her hands on the counter for balance and lifted herself onto her toes to look out the window. She was beautiful in the shadows. "That was my car. My parents gave it to me." She was crying. "That was my car." She had been in control since I arrived, but now she'd lost it. I crossed the kitchen to touch her. I didn't know how to do it, didn't know how to console her. I massaged her shoulders. It was the wrong kind of touch. She stepped away and stopped crying. "I guess we should go," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of one hand.

She did not look at me. I wanted her to look at me. I wanted her to know that I was there for her. I helped her with her coat, but the gesture felt cold and distant. All I could think of was how Gordon says when he's drunk that she only lets him have anal sex on special occasions, that it requires his placing a towel very carefully underneath her.

He had been out celebrating a promotion. If it had been a year earlier, I would have been in that car with him coming out of Baltimore. I had started declining his invitations about the same time that he slowed in offering them, but it still hurt to know I hadn't been invited.

He looked horrible. It was stitches, a broken nose, and black eyes—mostly airbag damage. The cop hadn't written it up as a drunk driving incident. There were no victims. Gordon hit a light pole doing fifty. He told the cop that a DWI would end his Army career. The cop wrote it up as a *loss of control*, and I phoned Gordon's unit with the right kind of lies.

*

Two-and-a-half years after the accident, two years out of the Army, I'm married, attending school in California. I got his number from Lori.

"What's up, brother? What is up!?"

"Andy?"

"It's after five. Are you drunk yet? If not, you should be!"

"How are you doing?"

It had been too long.

"Fine, man, fine. Long time no hear. What's going on?"

"Lori left me."

"Yeah, I heard. Called your house. I'm sorry." It felt good that he could tell me immediately.

"No warning. Came home one day, and she told me she wanted a divorce." I heard his lighter click and his first inhale. That was the old Gordon. "Living here with my brother. Got a good job. She's remarried, has a kid."

"She didn't tell me that she had a kid."

"It was like she knew the four years we were married. She was very serious about her birth control. She never wanted to have a kid. I wanted to have the kid. Remember those fights? She knew we weren't going to make it." He took another long inhale. "I didn't know. I didn't have a clue. Happily married then, poof, not married."

"She didn't tell me she had a kid."

"She has a kid and my dog."

"Was it horrible?"

"It wasn't fun." He took a pull from his cigarette.

"She made it sound like you guys were still friends."

"We're still friends because I call her when I get shit-faced. I cry like a baby and beg her to come back. She hasn't changed the number. I guess we're friends. I never saw it coming, didn't know." There's a long inhale and an even longer pause. "You didn't know, did you? You didn't see it coming?"

"I was surprised."

"Yeah. I never hid the drinking from her, never lied about it. She didn't bring it up much after the first year anyway. We were happy. Remember those weekends playing street hockey? We were happy."

"You looked happy."

"Well, forget about it. I'm trying to. What's up with you?" How are things?"

"I'm in school. Getting a Master's. Hanging around with the younger kids. Teaching them how to drink."

The call doesn't last much after that, and I get ready to go out with my university friends.

***

"Wanda is the saddest thing that I've ever seen. She smiles as she's playing. She smiles like there's no other place that she wants to be. Her hair is ratted and, this part will break your heart, there is a fucking giant pink comb sticking out of her back pocket. The legs of her jeans are rolled and pinned up near her thighs. The comb has knots of hair twisted through it, and it's covered in grime."

I had taken too long. Only a couple of them were really listening, and they were being polite. I don't finish the story. Nobody notices. I get up to go take a piss, but I step outside for some air instead. The lamplight makes my red truck look purple. I want to get in it and drive home to my wife, but I don't want it enough.

I missed him. It had been an easy call to make. But the words hadn't been there. The words had never really been there. I give a drunken wave to my truck and head back inside.

I have to walk by the table to get to the bathroom. Now they are drunk and attentive, talking desperately to each other about theories and stories that I cannot understand. I call over my shoulder as I pass, "There's something about that fucking comb."

Some drunk yells, "A toast to the dirty pink comb!"

My wife is at home. She is not waiting up for me. She quit doing that last year, and I knew it was coming, Gordon. You knew it too, goddamnit. I knew it then, and I can see it coming now. That's the fucking story. That's the story.